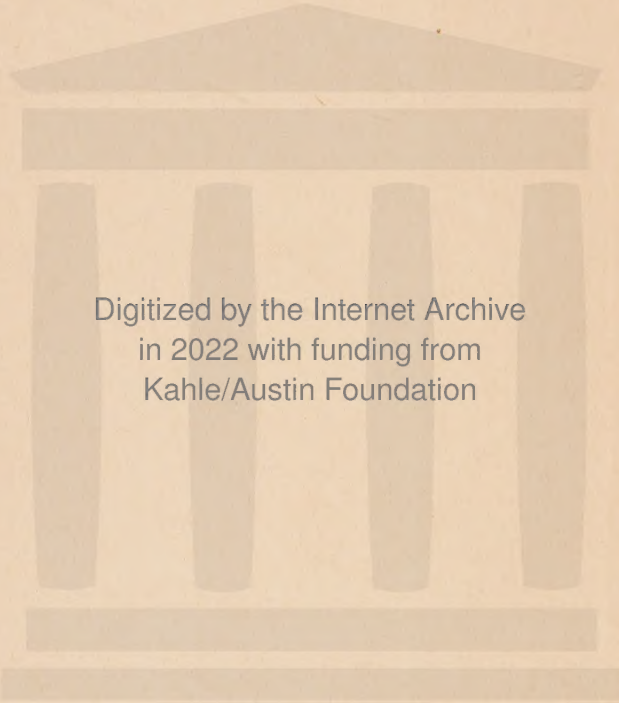




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CATS IN THE
ISLE OF MAN



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CATS IN THE ISLE OF MAN

DAISY FELLOWES



LINCOLN MAC VEAGH
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THE AUTHOR

TO
J. M. D

CATS IN THE
ISLE OF MAN

I

A LARGE room lit by the flames of a wood fire. A small boy and a small girl.

Claudia and John are lying in their little high-sided cots, exchanging whispered confidences in a persistent murmur. When they have discussed all the events of the day the girl, who is the elder by a few hours, tells a real story all out of her head. They both get very much excited as the wonderful tale reaches its climax. They cannot lie still, their little heads pop over the sides of their beds, and they stare at each other wide-eyed and flushed. Then they quieten down, and the little girl suddenly remembers what she imagines to be her duty to her brother; she tells him that he must forget the story she has just told and think about his sins.

“When you feel really sorry, promise God not to do them any more. Then you can go to sleep, and it won’t matter if you die, as you will go straight to heaven, or nearly straight.”

Then, quite confident that all is right for him, she begins to think about herself. As a rule when she is very tired she goes to sleep quickly, but often just when she feels most drowsy the shadow of her big sin comes creeping over her consciousness. She hopes and hopes that it is not a sin after all. Nowhere in any of the Prayer-Books or Catechisms, nowhere in the lists of venial and mortal sins, is such a thing mentioned — a broken promise. But it is no good: the awful details pass vividly before her mind.

It happened when she was five years old.

Her mother was a delicate, lovely woman of marvellous charm. One of Claudia’s friends once said, when they were discussing what they would be when they grow up:

“I want to be delicate like the Princess.”

She was always tired, the Princess, and found the children too noisy to have about; and Claudia was such an uncouth, ugly child that she was never shown with her brother to her mother's friends. The nurse dressed her anyhow, in clothes chosen by Brownie, her mother's companion. They were very ugly, useful clothes, and made her look shorter and more thick-set than she really was, but as long as she was warmly and not too shabbily clad it did not much matter what she looked like, as no one of any importance ever saw her.

It was a great surprise when her mother one day sent a message saying that Miss Claudia was to be ready at three o'clock to go out with her in the carriage. It was a cold, white November day, and the chestnut horses looked shiny in the sunshine. Inside the carriage there was a lovely leathery smell mixed with the scent from her mother's furs. Her mother

was very, very tall and slender, and when she spoke to Claudia her neck bent down like a swan's. They were both smiling and happy and very shy. Outside, the vapour from the horses came in gusts on to the window-pane, and the noise of their hoofs and harness made a sort of rhythm to which one could put words like

"I am out with my mum-my"

or

"Down, down, down the Champs Elysées."

A wonderful drive. Then they went into a shop where Claudia tried on a lot of wonderful dresses, all billowy and soft, and although Brownie had always said that low-necked dresses were dangerous and that blue made her look sallow, her mother chose a blue dress with short sleeves, a low neck and bows on the shoulders. Then she made her promise not to tell anyone; it was to be a great surprise.

On the return journey Claudia was a different being. She felt for the first time in her life that she might be attractive, and so she was, to the surprise and delight of her mother. But when they got back there was Brownie at the door, waiting to be told! She took charge of Claudia and asked where they had been. The child was so excited that she could not keep silent. The whole story gushed forth. Then she suddenly remembered her promise and became quite silent. When the dress arrived, Claudia's thick mane of hair was loosened from her hideous plait, the dress put on, and the child taken along the big hall to her mother, who must have been disappointed, because she did not say much, and her face looked sad when she kissed the child. It was the last time Claudia saw her mother, who died, by accident, a few days later.

Claudia, who was very earnest and credulous, was brought up in the Catholic religion,

which works such havoc upon the imagination and the feelings of children. It must be very harrowing for children to meditate upon their sins for hours and hours, and then to confess them amid the gruesome paraphernalia of the Confessional. It certainly influenced Claudia's nature and helped to make her introspective and morbid. A great pity.

No one knew how it came about that she assumed the care and bringing-up of her brother. He had been a very delicate baby and was very slow in learning to talk. When he first began his lessons he would not listen to anything he was told, because he didn't believe what grown-ups said. So Claudia got into the habit of explaining everything to him. Of course it was the same about his religious instruction, and the foolish people around her impressed upon her that she must always give him a good example. This made her self-conscious and unnatural, so they complained that she was a dull, sulky child.

When she was seven she had to make her first confession. She and her brother went to the church with their Prayer-Books and a big sheet of paper on which they had made out a list of their sins. Claudia did not put the Big Sin down and did not confess it, although she knew that to keep a sin back in Confession was an almost criminal offence. That night she thought she was going to die, go straight to hell and never meet her mother again. But she didn't.

After her brother the only person she really cared for was Brownie, whose constant complaint was her bad sight. She often said she knew she would soon be blind. Claudia's great treat was to sit on Brownie's knee and listen to the wonderful stories she used to tell her about her mother. There were wonderful intimate details about them. For instance:

"Your mother wore a plain grey dress, fashioned like a riding-habit, and a small straw hat trimmed with cherries, tied under her chin

with pink ribbons. Her hair was so smoothly brushed off her forehead that some of her relations when they first saw her thought she had none and begged her to wear a fringe. Once she travelled all the way to Rouen on the luggage-rack, although, as you know, she was very tall. One day she bicycled all the way to St. Cloud on a bicycle made for two." It was impossible that a person who had known her mother so well should go blind. Several opticians had failed dismally, and it seemed to Claudia that the only thing to do was to ask God to work a miracle. There did not seem to be any great difficulty about this. One asked for a thing, and if one had sufficient faith one's wish was granted. Apparently very few people really believed that their wishes would be granted, but there is no doubt that Claudia did, so she couldn't understand the delay.

She was eleven years old; she had been con-

firmed and for months each time she had the sacraments, as Brownie came down the steps of the church, uncertainly feeling her way, she thought the miracle would happen and that her wish would be granted. But she did not lose heart, as it always had been understood that The Almighty God worked in *His* own way in *His* own good time.

One day Brownie came in quite early to Claudia's room, and, kissing her, said:

"I am very happy. My favourite sister has written to me that she is going to become a Catholic. I have been longing for this to happen for years and years. Would you like to come to church with me? I am going to early service." Claudia was enchanted, and off they went along the cool, calm street to the old church. Brownie looked happier than Claudia had ever seen her. On the way back Brownie said:

"I have always told you that if one had sufficient faith one's wish would be granted, and you see, after a long time, my prayers have been answered."

This seemed so encouraging that Claudia told her about her own wish, and how she prayed night and morning that her sight should be restored. Brownie did not answer but went on holding the little hand very tightly in hers. At last, when they got quite near home, she said:

"My darling, you must not be discouraged: it is all for the best. We cannot understand the workings of Providence. I used often to say that if anything good was coming to me it should go instead to the sister whom I love. You prayed for me, and instead of regaining my sight my own dear wish has been granted and my sister saved."

But Claudia wrenched her hand free and ran home, saying to herself: "How could she be

so mean? She knows all about prayers. Of course, all this long time she has been praying against me — ”

Claudia has never told me much about her father, and although she was very fond of him I do not think she admired him very much. One has always heard people say that the Prince was charming and very popular. He had been a widower ever since the age of twenty-eight. A man with his huge fortune, his wonderful spirits and his looks had interests in life other than bringing up a couple of children. So the nursery was more or less abandoned to the ministrations of Brownie and the sundry teachers of music, dancing, drawing, elocution, etc., which it was then the fashion to have about.

In every family there is a person chosen among those who are seen most rarely who is the moral birch which threatens the children

at every turn. Their father never went to the nursery without feeling a great tenderness for his babies. But later in the schoolroom days he became that fabulous tyrant without which no system of education seems to be complete.

"I shall tell your father."

"Your father will certainly be angry."

"What will your father say?"

"If you promise not to do it again I shan't tell your father." Father it most certainly was in this instance. To John and Claudia he was represented as a terribly just and severe judge, who would stand no disobedience, listen to no excuses and brook no delay. How surprised his friends would have been, who knew that he would stand almost anything from them! They could live on his bounty from year to year, trade on his good name and credit, take advantage of his unfortunate choice in lady-friends — he minded nothing as long as they stood by him. He dreaded being

alone and would do anything to keep his friends about him, from the time he awoke in the morning to his last minute of consciousness at night.

Claudia had several grandmothers. Her father's mother was a fat old Polish lady who smoked cigars. She was good-natured and easy-going and laughed quite close to one's face, her chest heaving over her stays. She paid Claudia outrageous compliments which shocked the child, who knew how plain she really was. This grandmother lived in an amusing flat crammed full of furniture, most of which was upholstered in green satin trimmed with small yellow buttons and hung with fringe. There was a particularly attractive seat which the children always chose, on which one sat back to back, called a vis-à-vis. In the middle of her drawing-room was a huge hassock divided into four compartments by plush arm-rests, and crowned in the middle

by a tin flower-holder filled with evergreens.

The children heard casually from the coachman that the old lady while staying at Nice had married a Russian who had only one leg, and that the Prince was very angry about it. After that many extraordinary things were whispered among the servants. One was that a Cossack always slept on the floor before the Russian's door. Another was that he drank champagne for his lunch and never had a bath. They said that he was very violent and would some day do the old lady an injury. It was very exciting being told that one was to go and lunch with the happy pair on their return from their honeymoon, but when he threw the curried chicken across the table at their grandmother the children were much distressed and longed to leave the room.

The only daughter, Aunt Marie, wanted to live with her brother and the children, but he was afraid that he would lose his independence,

so he pretexted the smallness of the flat and said she should live with them when they had a larger house. She was very thin, with a sharp face and a ready tongue; her mother and she never got on, and the poor lady always left her daughter's room in tears after her visits.

There was another grandmother, the mother of their mother, who was very beautiful, and had fine grey hair like silk, tiny little feet and lovely cupboards full of soft scented things. Her voice was low and she seldom laughed. She used to like having Claudia beside her in the evening when her hair was being brushed. She put the combings into a large bag, and Claudia asked her every evening what she kept them for, as she never could remember.

"I told you last night, child. Now do try and guess."

Claudia thought: "Perhaps for putting in a pin-cushion?"

"Oh, no."

“For making curls to put on your head? For cleaning out your combs?” But all those answers were wrong, and the next night exactly the same thing would happen. To this day I am sure Claudia cannot remember what the bag was for.

She was ill for a long time and disappeared into the seclusion of her sick-room many months before she died; and there was a sort of story about that her horrid third husband had tried to make her sign a paper when she was unconscious. The day after her death they met him on the staircase, and he took Claudia’s dirty little hand in his and said:

“Well, at any rate, your nails are already in mourning.”

How they hated him. He was French.

Claudia’s mother actually did have a sister, and she was alive and living in Paris. She used to have tea in the schoolroom and say thrilling things about what one did when one

grew up. She was nice-looking, and in the evening had a most wonderful skin. She understood every single thing one ever said. This aunt was called Aunt Ruth, and she and Brownie used to have long talks alone together. She could make lovely drawings and rhymes, and lived in houses like the Arabian Nights. In one of them she had a swimming-bath, and the other was in Venice. Her husband had been a great musician, in fact the most distinguished amateur of his time. He was very much older than she was and had a high forehead like Shakespeare and Voltaire. He always travelled with his own beautiful coffin, and once when they were touring in the Black Forest he insisted upon his valet following their car in a two-seater, sitting beside the coffin, which looked very odd like that and not at all inviting. The children worshipped his memory, and believed implicitly all their Aunt Ruth told them about him. Although they

admired their aunt very much they knew that their father thought her imaginative and different. But they felt instinctively that she was more human than anyone else they knew, and that in a crisis they could appeal to her for aid or protection.

II

ONE day Brownie came into the schoolroom with her eyes red. They were often so, for she had a sentimental nature and a soft heart. Any sort of bereavement in the household staff, disobedience in the schoolroom, or, of course, any reference, however slight, to "your poor mother . . ." affected her in like degree.

The children knew that the only thing to do was to sit on her knee, and hold her tight, nestling into her shoulder. She would then rock herself slowly to and fro, gazing into a far away land of her own. The children liked the feeling of warmth and security, so the red eyes were always welcomed as the signal for a cuddle.

She was so conscientious that she would afterwards regret the moment of relaxation,

and be a little more strict. One morning they found the looking-glass decorated with an illuminated text: "No kissing allowed in lesson-time." This morning the text was totally ignored and the embrace very close and tender. After a little while she composed her face, straightened her back, and said quite sternly:

"Now, children, listen to me! There is a beautiful lady coming to lunch with your father to-day, and I want you to be very good. You must look your best, put on your Sunday clothes, and be as nice as possible. You, Claudia darling, must try to talk; your father is always saying that you never open your mouth."

"Who is she? Why is she coming?"

"Is she really beautiful?"

"More beautiful than Mother was?"

"Of course not, but they say she's a great beauty."

"Is she French?"

"No, she's American."

"Why is she coming to lunch? Will Aunt Ruth be there?"

"Who will sit opposite Father?"

"Will there be anyone else?"

Nervously Claudia, John and Brownie stood waiting in the smoking-room. Half-an-hour later their father and the strange lady came in together. She was a tall, splendid woman, richly caparisoned. She entered the room boldly as if she were quite at home. Their father, however, seemed rather shy; he playfully went up to the children and pinched their ears or pulled their hair, asking inadequate questions about their lessons.

The lady kissed Claudia lightly on the forehead, called her a little dear, a sweet wee thing, and kept her standing by her knee while she beamed at the Prince. She sat in the place of honour. Claudia was deeply hurt, John greatly angered, as it was a double slight: the

only person who sat there when Claudia did not was beloved Aunt Ruth.

The lady talked in English and broken French. She was very ironical and amusing about the genders in the French language. One bright saying they all remembered for a long time:

"Now, for instance, the word 'tunnel.' Why don't you say *une tunnel*, as it is spelt '*tunnelle*'?"

The Prince was quite *sous le charme*.

"*Vous êtes exquise, chère amie*. Your wit, your beauty, your clothes. If only you would take an interest in this plain little girl of mine, I believe you could make something out of her."

"Why, Prince, I should just love to. My own little girl is supposed to be the best-dressed child in Washington. I miss her so! She lives, you know, with my sister, who worships her, but it is hard on her poor little


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mother! Children are the joy of life. What is a poor woman to do with herself without a home or a child to look after? Ah me! I dote on children. I should like to have a large house in the country and fill it with children."

They hated her. They hated her large, brown, shiny eyes, the colour on her face, the scent she used, and all the lies she told!

The visit was not repeated. Afterwards, I learned through my mother that Aunt Ruth had used her influence to avert the catastrophe. But little Claudia, that afternoon in the Avenue, was quivering with indignation and surprise at her father's lack of taste. "Men," she said, "do not know anything."

For ages, when we played together, she would assume the rôle of "beautiful lady," and send John and myself into fits of laughter by her antics and her talk. The little, fat child would strut about, holding a fork to her eyes in lieu of an eye-glass, ogling and preening

herself, and talking through her nose with an exaggerated twang. For years her performance, when she was in the humour to give it, was our joy and amusement, and fresh subtleties were added now and then, until no one could have recognised the original.

Eight years later, when Claudia was seventeen, this woman reappeared on the scene, slightly more subdued in colour and without her accent; but this time her influence made itself felt in a more serious way.

Although Claudia and — out of sympathy — myself disliked the person we called “The American Beauty,” in a general way we worshipped things American. I am a continental American, having lived all my life in the Avenue du Bois, Paris, France. My mother came over when she was a child, with Claudia’s mother, who was called Clarke. Her father was sub-manager of an American bank there, and he was able to give his daughter a very large income when she married the Prince.

Claudia and I had the same sympathies; and celebrated the Fourth of July with great ardour; on the Fourteenth — which should have been a great day for Claudia, as her father was a Frenchman — the children were not allowed to go out. The Prince, who was a very ardent royalist, could not forget the terror which that date had always awakened in the minds of his ancestors. He was a dutiful subject of the exiled monarch, and spent many months doing duty in Belgium, Sicily or England.

After the lease of the flat in the Avenue du Bois came to an end, Aunt Marie persuaded her brother to move to a more aristocratic quarter. They settled in a wonderful old house on the Place des Invalides. It had a charming view of the old building surrounded by its moat, and had the advantage of looking right on to the trees, in whose shade the annual fair is held.

Inside, the house was very lofty and contained many beautiful vestiges of ancient

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mouldings and decorations. All the family crowded in, using some of the reception-rooms as living-apartments. The Prince chose a room on the front and had to go up two flights of stairs for his bath to his great annoyance. Claudia had a lovely schoolroom next to his room—it used to be a music-room, decorated with lyres and flutes in the gilded woodwork; the ceiling was painted to represent the sky.

Aunt Marie, who had achieved her desire of living with them all, very rarely moved from her secluded apartment on the ground floor. She had a mysterious illness and was a constant invalid. When I came to play with Claudia on Thursdays and Saturdays, we used to be called down to see Aunt Marie's friends at tea-time. They were a grimy lot of middle-aged women who smiled knowingly at everything we said. They admired my fair hair and complexion, and my clothes. Poor Claudia

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did not like it. She never said a word, and certainly did not look prepossessing when her audience was not disposed in her favour. When she felt she was admired she became bright and attractive.

Aunt Marie was terribly jealous of Brownie; it was difficult, if not impossible, for the children to please them both. Unfortunately, as the aunt lived on the ground floor, their father always stopped there before coming up to see them. She would pour out a lot of grievances about the children's behaviour and appearance. The poor weary man would be quite *énervé* before he even saw them. In consequence, they never knew if there was going to be a scene or not. To me it seemed a terribly hard sort of life. My mother worshipped me, and I went to bed every night quite happy, without a thought of a difficulty between us, but Claudia and John imagined that grown-up people had invented a sort of

complicated game, the rules of which they kept to themselves, and that there was no way of doing the thing right as long as they remained children. I have never to this day met two such conscientious little children as Claudia and John, although sometimes when the injustice was too obvious, they rebelled against the powers that were.

The Prince, whose health was not good, led a life of dissipation, living on the frayed edge of his nerves. My father and mother often spoke about him together, when they forgot I was there, deploring the reckless mode of life which he had chosen. He was amazingly young in years for a man who was nearly at the end of his life, worn out by every excess, yet to the end his charming qualities made of him a delightful companion, and he was loved by everyone who knew him.

Claudia certainly had always been afraid of her father, but when she was fourteen — that

terrible year when she was covered with pimples, and so shy and ugly that it was agony coming down to meals and meeting people — she fairly quaked with fear when her father spoke to her, and felt her mouth going all crooked when she tried to answer one of his questions.

He did not like taking her about, but sometimes some of his women friends thought they would please him by asking him to bring her to see them; she would be brought, and made to sit in their drawing-rooms, mute and self-conscious, listening to all that was said, until both her father and the women could bear it no longer, and they sent her down to wait in the carriage.

She liked that, as she was passionately fond of watching people, and especially people passing in streets. Their appearance seemed less remote and more tragic than the appearance of people on the stage. They were so much

more real, and fitted in much better as the heroes of the endless stories which she invented whenever she was alone. After one of those outings she would tell us some new story, but the heroine was always an ugly little girl who became a great beauty and a world-famed artist.

III

WHEN Claudia was seventeen she thought a great deal about art. For years she had studied painting, and was now allowed to have a studio of her own, where she painted in oils after the human figure. The human figure was a very thin girl, with pretty red hair. They became great friends and discussed life, problems of philosophy, interior decoration, and colour-schemes. They were under the impression that the ideas which they fitfully gleaned from exhibitions, museums, reviews, or the talk of friends were new and original. They mistrusted the flamboyant and the romantic, worshipped line and undecided colouring. Whistler was their great master. They even went so far as to read his tedious treatise on the art of making enemies.

Somebody once took Claudia to see a Chinaman who kept a shop in the Latin quarter. This changed all her ideas, as she quickly perceived that here was the real thing. The sketches on gold paper backgrounds shed as much charm as the paintings of the beloved Whistler, yet they were marvellously alive and accurate, though with the same exquisite reserve.

In literature and music Claudia had very definite ideas. Her family began to be impressed by her intolerance; they feared she might be strong-minded and turn into a suffragette, or something equally objectionable. So they decided in a family conclave to bring her out that very season, although she was not eighteen.

Her father had taken infinite pains to teach her to ride, and when they were both on horseback they felt less shy of each other than at any other time. Every morning ever since she

could remember they rode round the wonderful race-courses of Auteuil and Longchamps, which are more or less deserted except for a few weeks in the spring. Part of the coming-out scheme was, of course, to see and be seen, so quite conscientiously they now finished their rides in the fashionable Avenue des Acacias.

Among the throng of people there was a young man who appeared quite regularly. He wore a very shiny top-hat and drove a racing-car up and down the Avenue at about the luncheon-time. Claudia thought he was the smartest person she had ever seen, and admired him immensely. Her father remarked upon his absurd appearance, pointing out how ridiculous it was for a person to wear a hat of that sort while driving a powerful open car. But the more Claudia saw of him, the more she liked him. By comparison the other young men looked ordinary, bourgeois and insignifi-

cant. During the whole of her exhausting, exciting first season Claudia nursed a secret liking for this eccentric young man.

This liking suddenly developed into something more romantic. A dear old lady asked Claudia to come to her studio to be photographed in the Chinese costume which Claudia wore when we all dressed up. The old lady's granddaughter had one very like it and she thought the two girls would make a pretty picture together.

Felix de Foljambe, our young hero of the racing-car, was almost a member of the household, being a sort of relation of theirs and the favourite of the moment.

On her way home Claudia called to see me. I found her very strange, she did not pay attention to anything I said, and she would not look at me. Her eyes were feverish and her hands very cold. She had wrapped a handkerchief round one of her hands — she told me

later that Felix was very much overcome when they first met and later as they were walking downstairs a little behind the others, he took her hand and passionately kissed it. For several days she kept a handkerchief round her hand so that no one else should touch the place he had kissed.

Of course I knew all about this little infatuation. We discussed it almost daily in the urgent notes which we sent each other when we could not meet. After every party I asked her if she had seen him there, and every day at lunch-time I rang up to find out if he had been in the Bois. Our sacred confidences were shared by no one, as we should have considered it high treason to let a grown-up into our secrets. It somehow never entered my head that it might have been wise to find out what Brownie and the Prince thought about this romance. It is quite probable that Brownie knew all about it from the day it began, but

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she kept as close as an oyster, so that we could not guess what she thought. I daresay she tried to discuss it with the Prince, but it is doubtful if she ever got a chance. I can hardly picture her stopping him on the staircase as he rushed into his room to dress for dinner and trying to explain to him the state of his daughter's affections.

I am quite sure that Claudia never discussed all this with her brother, whom she rather neglected at that time. A girl cannot rave in the same uncontrolled fashion about her stupid fancies to a boy, even if he be her own brother, so they drifted rather apart just then. We saw little of him, as he hurried in and out of the house, with his abbé on his heels like a shadow, going to classes at the Sorbonne, or to the crammer who was preparing him for his examinations. Sometimes in the evening, when Claudia was dressed for a party and waiting for her father to fetch her, her brother

would come in, and they would sit hand in hand, talking in the same old whispering voices; but now there were many silences — long silences — in which they did not know what to say. The nearest that the brother and sister got to discussing the future was on these evenings in the schoolroom, when Claudia would suddenly begin weaving her pictures round them and conjuring up visions of a mysterious home where they both would soon be going, and the horses and dogs they would keep, the wonderful rides through the forest in the early morning, the fishing in the lake.

Then the door would clang, and her father would appear.

He was always rather suspicious of these two sitting there plotting together. His daughter would never get married as long as her brother was in the house, and he made up his mind to send the boy to Germany to finish his education whenever the examinations were over.

It really looked as if they all wanted to get rid of her, and Claudia, who was quite willing to fall in with any new plan, felt that she was not fulfilling expectations when at the end of her first season she was not even engaged. Everyone she saw said the same thing in their different ways. Brownie said at least once a day:

“When you are married I shall go and visit my people in Australia. I always promised that I would go home, and it is now twenty years since they have seen me.”

Brownie's father was a clergyman getting on for eighty. Her mother had been pretty; a picture in a museum at Melbourne had been painted from her. It is there still, and they call it “The Seven Wise Virgins.” When they were small, she and her eleven brothers and sisters used to bowl their hoops along the streets, chanting “Barker's wife's mother lay sick of a fever, sick of a fever, sick of a fever — ”



Claudia's father complained about having to go upstairs for his bath, and said:

"I think I had better use your room as my bedroom when you are married. We shall all be much more comfortable."

The grandmother who had married the Russian, and was now living alone, said:

"How lovely you are, my dear! You must marry someone very, very nice. I wonder who it will be? Is it not interesting to think that he exists, and walks about, and that you may meet him any day, in any place, perhaps at the corner of the street!" And she leered up at Claudia through her fat eyelids.

Aunt Ruth wanted her to marry someone wonderful, clever, gifted, brilliant:

"He won't be more clever than you are," she said, "but he must make you think he is." She talked about her own wonderful husband, and played on the piano some of the things that he used to compose.

Aunt Marie alone never said anything: she

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went about like a disapproving mouse. She disliked the clothes that Claudia contrived out of her very small allowance; she disliked her plain coiffure, and disapproved of riding for women.

As summer wore on I gathered that everyone was keenly disappointed. Claudia herself felt the reaction after the hectic gaiety of the last few months. It appeared, later, that there had been a few proposals, but they had not been mentioned to her, as they were inappropriate. I believe that our poor Felix of the shiny top-hat had been one of those unfortunate swains.

Claudia, of course, stood in great awe of her father, and he was also in great awe of her. They dreaded being alone together except when they were on horseback, and never entered into any subject that could become personal. They felt instinctively that if they did their opinions would clash. So when he had

anything particular to say to her, the Prince always chose someone to act as a messenger. There was no official messenger, any of the *habitués* who happened to be about served the purpose.

It was towards the end of the season that Claudia rang me up, her voice full of excitement, urgently requesting my presence. I went to her in her lovely schoolroom. The fair was on; through the open window the merry-go-round and a hundred diverse noisy bands brayed into the room. The sun was streaming in through a cloud of dust. Claudia's eyes were sparkling.

"Darlingest," she said, "who do you think I met last night? The loveliest, sweetest, cleverest, wittiest woman in all the world, and she likes me! She spoke to me for a long, long time!"

"Well, who is it? Darlingest, who is it? Who is it?"

"I will tell you: you will never believe! It is Molly Johnson, our American Beauty!"

I was aghast, shocked, horrified.

"You cannot mean it! Not the same one?"

"Yes, the same one. But you don't know, darling: she is divine. I adore her."

I felt then that I had always expected this, and yet it was a very great shock. Molly Johnson! So often had I heard her name. So our American Beauty of the old days was Molly Johnson, one of the celebrated Dean Sisters! Claudia and Molly Johnson! I was appalled.

What I thought did not matter; she did not notice if I answered or not. Her phrases, her eulogies wanted no punctuation. Sick and pale, I returned to my mother, who thought I was sickening for a fever. I wrote Claudia a long letter; I told her all I thought; I begged her not to see Molly Johnson again. I told her

some of the things I knew about her — the least bad things. Not about the poor dead Fay, but I did mention the child living out there in the States, longing for a sight of its celebrated mother.

I told her about the husband and the supposed accident. I ended by telling her how precious and marvellous she herself was. I sent the stupid letter. Next morning she rang me up.

“Darlingest,” she said, “I got your lovely letter. Why do you bother your little head like that? Really, it is very naughty of you. Molly is not at all the sort of person you think she is, and you really must not believe all people say. She is coming to tea with me to-morrow, in the schoolroom. Is it not wonderful of her to find the time, when all the men in Paris are after her? I should not be surprised if Father also. . . . Would you like to meet her?”

The Prince’s name had for some time been

linked with the notorious beauty's. Was it possible that Claudia did not know it?

I did not go to that tea-party. The next day, and the next, Claudia was not available. Molly was taking her to her *fournisseurs*. A radiant Claudia, on the third day, danced into our rooms at the top of the house in the Avenue. Her hair was waved, she had on a new hat, a little rouge on either cheek and on her lips transformed her whiteness into a flushed brilliancy.

A boy from the Embassy who had come to see Mother never took his eyes off her. She flirted with him, was gay and amusing. How quickly she had learned! When we were alone I had not the heart to show her I was sad. She attacked my letter immediately, and indignantly refuted all the allusions I had made to Molly's past. I scarcely listened to her, but I heard with astonishment that the woman had talked about her sister.

“It is awful, the way people believe any story they hear, without knowing *any* of the facts of the case. Poor Molly was actually accused of not caring for her poor sister Fay. As a matter of fact, she loved her as I love John — the great love of her life. As she was so much the elder, she actually brought the child up and spent nights thinking of plans for her future. She was such a brilliant girl that her future might have been radiant. I am quite sure Molly must have always given her the best advice, and tried to keep her straight, although she was a wayward, wilful girl. After the tragedy, Molly left the States, never to return. She simply could not face it, although by doing this she abandoned her little May, whom she has not seen for years. What pluck the woman must have, to laugh and joke when all the time this tragedy is eating her heart out!”

I tried to tell her — I was longing to tell her

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—I could not! My mother decided that afternoon that she was going to take me to Trouville, for a change of air, as I was looking tired. I consented willingly. Cowardly I probably was, but I did not realise the extent of the havoc which would be wrought in my absence.

When I got back Claudia had left Paris, and I did not see her again till after she had written to me announcing her engagement.

Mother's best friend and gossip, Mrs. Harry Wilson, came to say good-bye, as we were leaving so hurriedly for Trouville. She was well up in the *potins* of Paris, so of course the affair of the Prince and Molly Johnson did not fail to crop up. I was sitting on the balcony, looking down on the shining asphalt of the Avenue du Bois glistening through the trees. Directly opposite was the pink palace built by the celebrated French aristocrat who, like the



frog in the story, had inflated himself with pride till he burst like a pricked bubble, leaving the palace to his hated American wife.

My mother's voice was heard:

"After all, I don't think you can put down her husband's death at her door. He was terribly embarrassed financially when the accident happened. What was it he did? Oh, yes, I know — he walked off the subway platform — a merciful death. And Molly always said that she worshipped her sister. She certainly was proud of her looks and took some trouble with her when she was a child."

"Why, of course Molly is human; after all, she probably did not guess that Fay would take things so to heart. At eighteen one is thin-skinned. The poor child! Her beloved Felix and her adored sister! That also appeared to be an accident; we only know that she died of heart-failure after a hectic scene with Molly —"

“My dear, it is all so unpleasant. Wasn’t there also a maid who made some sort of statement about sleeping-draughts?”

“Yes; she was indignant at the insinuation that the girl was in the habit of taking them; she said that she had only begun since her sister’s arrival at her flat.”

“Did you know Fay very well?”

“As well as I know my own child. They were at school together, and she used to come to us for the holidays. I did not see her after she left for Europe to be finished. Why, Julia worshipped her — for her looks, of course, and for a sort of plaintive coaxing way she had. When she was quite a child she had a horror for all that was not quite nice. I remember when she came to us one year she had the room next to mine. In the middle of the night she came running into my room, sobbing, quite distraught. She flung herself into my arms. ‘Auntie,’ she said, ‘there’s a bird — *killed* —

in my room.' She was trembling all over; she could not go back. A poor little robin had been caught between the upper and lower sash of her window and was squashed flat. The child was quite big then — about fourteen. Another time, a neighbour who had come over for the day, not knowing the child's name, had said something at tea about Molly's affair with old Vanderlip. Just before dinner Julia came to me and said she could not get Fay to open her door; so I went. She let me in, but I saw she had been crying. I said something about dinner, and she blushed and said, ' May I stay up here? I have such a headache.' Of course, knowing how sensitive she was, I told her the people were not staying on for dinner, so she came down, and was unusually charming although they were still there. She understood that they had meant no harm. She had quick impulses and was really almost morbidly sensitive."

There was a silence. Then Mrs. Wilson said:

“And there goes Molly — scot free — living in luxury, quite probably going to marry Prince Odo.”

My mind was filled with pictures of the poor dead girl. And Felix — how was it that I had never heard before that the hero of this unfortunate affair was Felix? No one in Claudia's crowd knew about it; they all knew that Felix had remained a few years in Washington and had had some sort of intrigue there with a good-looking but not a rich American girl. Then suddenly, with a blinding brilliant light I saw it all. Molly, the bold, brilliant collector, rolling her brown eyes, seducing, acquiring, the attractive stranger, and the poor little sister — the sensitive little sister who could not bear to see a bird die! How lucky Molly was. Her husband dead, a convenient street accident — had he also been sensitive?

— and now Molly, quite possibly going to marry Prince Odo. But would she? I would tell Claudia everything — I would make her believe. But no; I felt a deep fear of telling her the truth — a fear that by doing so I would lose her friendship for ever. Who was I to interfere in her life? Her life and Molly's. Now that Molly was Claudia's friend I would not interfere. I could not; I was too proud. If Claudia married Felix, Molly would steer clear of them both — probably she would now influence Prince Odo into giving his consent to his daughter's marriage. Daughters are always a hindrance in the case of a second marriage. In a way, that would arrange everything. Alas! I could not know that things would turn out in exact opposition to my wishes. Molly did use her influence on the Prince, but to make herself safe — safe for ever from her past.

So I left my poor Claudia alone to fight her

first real battle with life; my pride prompted me not to interfere, as I knew that Claudia was under a new charm more potent than my own. I felt my influence over her slipping away. No charmer, no attractive woman even, had ever taken any notice of Claudia before. I had always known that the first time she came near a fascinator she would be fascinated. Her enthusiasm for all things beautiful, her uncontrolled, simple ecstasy at any new manifestation of beauty, always scared me. I somehow half expected or half remembered things subconsciously which came upon Claudia as a shock and a complete surprise. Everything was new to her, physically as well as mentally. She was quite unprepared for the battle of life, never realising the simple truths of nature or showing any curiosity about the animal side of existence.

At one time I had great hopes that Claudia was strong-minded and intolerant, as she had

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such definite ideas about certain things, and it was a surprise to me when I found that each time she had to face a situation or to take a decision, she did not seem able to focus her mind upon the problem, but would let herself go whichever way the wind blew. Now, after all these years, I know that it was a sort of generous pluck which compelled her to do this, as she never really undervalued the difficulties she had to face — she simply took the risk.

Molly was trying to shape my poor Claudia's life into lines that spelt safety to herself. The Prince was eager to see his daughter established in a home of her own — Felix wanted Claudia for himself; the girl was dazzled by a view of life made brilliant by passion and gleaming with the reflected glory of a romantic woman's past. Would she flutter in a straggling course to safety and the shore or fly off into the heart of a golden mirage?

## IV

TOWARDS the end of August I got two letters from Claudia, written from Coppet in Switzerland. My mother and I were then on our way to Venice, where Felix proposed to join us, to talk about plans.

Here are the letters:

Saturday, August 22nd.

DARLINGEST —

I am living in this funny old Swiss castle, where Madame de Staël use to live. My window looks on to a courtyard paved with large bumpy pink and orange stones. There is a semi-circular stone trough just beneath me, which I cannot see. A leaden pipe drips a few blobs of water into it now and then, making a lovely splash. The gates are open, and beyond in the sunshine a meadow slopes down to the Lake of Geneva, a meadow sweet



with buttercups, daisies, trefoil and such-like delicacies, that the greedy honey-bees see with their invisible eyes before they lustfully pounce on them.

Since I arrived here I have received two postcards with no signature to them, but of course they are from Felix. One has his motto printed on it, "*Sans Fin*," and one has ours, "*Jusqu' aux Etoiles*." I wish we were allowed to write to each other, but of course the letters would be read by someone. I wonder what Aunt Marie thought about the postcards? — she said nothing!

Molly — my beautiful Molly — is coming to spend the day here to-morrow. She and my father are staying together at Evian. I am simply dying to hear how they have got on together.

What a day! It is good to be alive!

Write soon, dearest.

CLAUDIA.

Monday, 24th August.

DARLINGEST —

It is all over! My heart is *broken*! I know something about Felix which makes everything awful. It all happened yesterday when Molly came over from Evian. She was a brick! No other woman in the world would have had the pluck to tell me, especially as her *sister Fay* was concerned. I feel like an old woman to-day. All night I hoped it was not true, but this morning, in the clear, merciless light of day, I knew it must be. You *must* love Molly now. She has saved me from a terrible thing. My father, it seems, has known all along that I had this fancy for Felix, and was most distressed about it. Dear, kind Molly offered to come herself and tell me, in the best way she could, what she knew about him, so that I should know what kind of man he really was. Of course she never told father what she told me — she could not tell anyone that!

When Felix comes to Venice to meet you, please tell him that I shall never marry him.

There are few people here, luckily, as I am nervous and moody and cannot sit through a long meal. Unfortunately that silly old Count de Limon is coming to-morrow. I don't like him!

Darlingest, I am longing to see you. I am very miserable. I think I shall never marry. I feel as if I shall never feel warm again! What an awfully ugly world this is.

Write, darling, write to your lonely

CLAUDIA.

We were sitting on the balcony of the Grand Hotel in Venice when Felix, our poor Felix, joined us. My mother had prepared him for bad news, but he was stunned when he understood that it was Claudia herself who had sent him the definite message. He had thought that his past was buried. Even the news of

Molly's arrival in Europe so soon after the tragedy had not worried him. He thought that she would have preserved her secret more jealously than he could himself. He had never loved Molly, but had been entirely captured by her mature charm — in fact, she had conquered him. He was away at the time that the accident happened; he had come over to Europe to get his mother's consent to his engagement and was having a difficult time persuading her to give in, when he heard about poor Fay — the little sensitive girl's death. He had cared for her at first, but when the elder sister had created that impossible situation he had begun to dread the whole thing, and was going on with it only from a sense of duty. Fay was but a child, and would get over it. His mother was being difficult — he would make his mother's bigoted view on religion a good and valid excuse. Molly he hoped never to see. So when it ended, he

went on his way, the almost unconscious cause of this over-seas tragedy. It now seemed to him more of a blessed escape than a devastating catastrophe. He adored Claudia, who was safe, rich, charming — a devout Catholic — and he had only to overcome the Prince's dislike to make all come well. He was absolutely stunned by the revelation that his past had crept upon him. His past, which did not count, was becoming the principal factor in his life.

I knew it was no use writing to Claudia about it, especially as Felix was only staying with us for two days, on his way to Austria. I could not have got an answer before he left. He made a vivid impression upon my mind. I had never seen very much of him, and was much interested — thrilled even — at this opportunity of studying the person whom my beloved Claudia had chosen as the object of her admiration. He was certainly good-looking;

extremely slight for so tall a man; he had an almost feminine charm of manner, and seemed to beg one's approval of all he said with his large dog-like devoted eyes. He said, in truth, nothing at all remarkable — his wit was easy but not original; in fact, nothing about him was in the least original. He might have been the super-youth of a brigade of youths turned out by a wholesale manufacturer. He was just a little neater, bolder and quicker than the others.

Of course he adored Claudia — she was the first serious passion of his life. Poor little Fay was forgotten, Molly abhorred. He had adored Claudia from the time he first set eyes on her at the Opera. He had written her many impassioned love-letters which he never sent; he thought of what she would think of him in every one of his actions. He adopted a new personality entirely according to what he imagined her taste to be.

When he was told she would not marry him, he said, among other things, "No one else will make her happy. I alone understand her." I was surprised to see that he really did have a very good idea of her character, although they had never exchanged more than half-a-dozen words, and those in public. What I now think rather odd is that neither of us — Felix or myself — tried to change Claudia's decision. There was a fatality about it, and somehow we felt we *could not* influence a person whom we both imagined to be so sensible and so superior to ourselves.

When I took the poor boy to the station he had lost some of his dash. I was rather amused to see that he had already adopted the air of the rejected lover — a large black felt hat and loose cravat gave him almost a Byronic look, and his whole attitude bespoke utter abandon of all earthly joys. I was really sorry for him — and we were both deeply concerned about

Claudia. We could not bear to think of her future. I said, "She will never love anyone else, *really*," and he, leaning out of his carriage, answered, "That is the saddest part of all."



## V

### AUTUMN in Paris.

Claudia's letters were dispirited, and her newly-gained vivacity had given place to a more apathetic listlessness than she had ever known. One afternoon, as she was comfortably reading and dreaming in the school-room, a comic old person came in: he was a sort of great-uncle, and very popular with everyone. She was delighted to see him, and welcomed him effusively. She says he was so self-conscious that it quite amused her, but after a while he pulled himself together and began speaking, without looking at her, as if he had learned a part.

"Now, my little one, you know how fond I am of your father, and how fond he is of you. He has asked me to tell you a thing which he

considers very important. His dear friend Limon is desirous of paying you his addresses. You saw him this summer, and I know he is not very young. His estates are considerable, and your father seems to have set his heart upon this proposal coming to a happy issue."

He then sat down, mopping his brow like a person in a play. Claudia was interested: this was better than nothing, and might even be rather amusing.

"Well, Uncle Beaupoil, but that is great fun. I think the Count is charming. Could not he come and spend the autumn at Rambouillet for the shooting, and then I shall see more of him? I have never really thought of him as a possible fiancé."

"The question is, that it appears we cannot have Limon coming out there all the time if you do not finally accept his offer. He would look so ridiculous, and his family is certain to be offended."

"But this makes it very difficult! I do not see how I can know what I think about him if I do not see him very, very often. Up till now, he has always treated me like a little girl, and I have seen so little of him."

"People never really do know anything about each other. Even if you saw him every day for a year you might not know your mind. I feel sure that your father, with his wonderful knowledge of the world, must know what is best for you. Remember I have to take him your answer. He is in his room now, waiting for me."

For a time they talked about other things. I don't know if Claudia was trying to make up her mind. If she was, it was very much like those games in which one answers "yes" or "no" or "black" or "white" without knowing at all to what it applies. At any rate, she was spared the painful impression of having chosen for herself, because her father, ter-

ribly bored at having been alone for twenty minutes, opened the door, and said, very cheerfully:

“Well, that’s all right. You are a good little girl, Claudia. Let’s drive out to Versailles before dinner.”

Count Robert de Limon was a tall man with greyish hair and a good figure. In the evening, after dinner, his ruddy complexion would get darker still, and little veins in his nose and cheeks showed up like rivers on a map. Claudia thought his appearance rather grand; he was quite impressive in a way, and had very good manners. It was a great treat and a nice change to be suddenly treated like a pretty woman, after the harsher treatment of the schoolroom. No one had ever paid her compliments, or taken an interest in her little tastes and imaginings. She had never had a long talk with Felix, as she only saw him at

parties, where they were never alone together. In France before the war there was no such thing as sitting out between dances. The girls sat beside their chaperon all the time they were not waltzing or one-stepping in the crowd of other débutantes.

Count Robert had a knack, which came from long practice of asking questions about the futile things that women are interested in, and appearing to appreciate their answers, while all the time his gentle mind was wandering in other spheres. It was amusing receiving presents of flowers. When he came into the room in which she was, he would come straight to her, bend very low over her hand, and, kissing it, would look up into her face, enquiring very tenderly if she were well. He talked a lot about his home in Anjou, and told quite funny stories about his neighbours and the old curé. Sometimes he sighed and said, almost in a whisper, "The poor old house has

been so long without a mistress; it is incredible to me that a person as brilliant as yourself should take pity on the owner."

The idea of having a big house to do up appealed very strongly to Claudia, and her head was full of plans for fitting in her "new ideas" with the old-world atmosphere of the place. She dreamt of her life there with her brother. Of herself sneaking out on a frosty evening when Count Robert was safely asleep over his paper by the fire. John would be with her, of course, and they would run along the avenues over the hard new snow and all round the fountains, and so to the stables, to see their pets and talk to the dogs. Then back again, all glowing, to the fireside, to play a game of piquet, while the Count still slept on quite happily. She also looked forward to showing me all her possessions and new arrangements when I returned from the States; she knew how I would admire the grand old

place. So Claudia's eyes would sparkle when she listened to all he said, and little by little she grew accustomed to his afternoon calls, and was quite eager to know what he had brought her, and where he had been the night before.

After the summer was over, it was decided that the engagement was to be officially announced. Then, as is usual on those occasions, the entire household seemed to go quite mad. The house itself became the setting for a sort of mystery play, information-bureau and clearing-house. The engagement was to last a month. Presents kept pouring in from people Claudia had never seen or heard of. She wrote all the letters herself, averaging twenty a day. All the afternoons were spent trying on dresses or ordering linen from long lists composed by Brownie of what she was supposed to require. Her father never took much interest, except that one day when he heard

her speaking rapturously about the marvellous line and the wonderful colours in the dresses being made by Paul Poireau he suddenly said she was to cancel the order, as no decent woman would wear clothes which lay loosely about the figure and whose colours were so daring. This was a great disappointment to Claudia, as she had imagined that her wearing those odd clothes would change the fashion.

The wedding was a splendid affair; the enormous Cathedral was packed with people. Two or three Bishops officiated. People spoke about it afterwards as the most gorgeous private wedding they had seen in Paris since the Empire. Claudia enjoyed being the centre of so much pomp and splendour, and did her part with credit. Strangely, all Claudia's nervousness of the preceding days had now vanished completely. She felt quite confident that she was entering through a sort of trium-



phal arch into a new and beautiful world where everything would be easy, bright and amusing. There seemed to be very many people to say good-bye to, and all the important ones disappeared just as she wanted to say good-bye to them. The big new motor-car was painted red and lined with red upholstery, and red also were the bags, cushions and rugs. It must have looked quite hideous, but Claudia had heard someone say, "*Le rouge est le fard des brunes.*"

She was dressed in a black-and-white tailor-made costume, which she showed me afterwards. I didn't think much of it.

Noisily the big car was cranked up and lumbered off, bumping and tossing over the uneven pavement of the street. All this I have gleaned from the papers and from different people who were at the wedding. At that time I was ill with typhoid fever in New York, and my mother thought it wiser not to

tell me the date of the wedding. The last letter I got from Claudia before I took to my bed was the one telling me about her engagement and her trousseau.

## VI

THE town of Limon le Pont lies on the Loire between the rival cities of Tours and Orleans. It owes its existence to the fact that the bridge spanning the river was in olden days the only one in the district. It is now almost impracticable in places and extremely narrow, although the parapet bulges out into regular excrescences to allow vehicles to pass each other. The old Toll House, embodied in the middle arch, juts out in a triangle on to the roadway, and causes the many tumbrils, carts and herds of cattle that continually cross the river to make a sharp circuit. If one looks up at the bridge from the river the immense pillars appear to support the nave of a ruined Cathedral. Around each base there is a sort of ledge or slimy incline that might afford a pre-

carious foothold to anyone desirous of keeping dry, but that is the place that the village boys choose in the summer-time as their club-house and diving-board.

Most picturesque do their nude little bodies look in the twilight, like plaster embellishments added by an enterprising architect to relieve the dreary stonework.

Down there by the river the poorer folk spread and multiply in biblical simplicity. Scarcely a house can boast that it has four walls and a roof of its own. They have been so often repaired that none of the walls, windows or doors match each other. A stranger could spend an interesting day roaming in the jumbled passages and stairs in an effort to solve this brick-and-mortar puzzle.

The main street cuts ruthlessly through the tangled network of by-ways, sometimes even right through a house, the one remaining wall of which becomes a hoarding crammed with

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advertisements. Some way down this street there is a large, heavy double door, behind which there seems to be an unusual activity. If the wanderer be abroad in the early morning he may find the door open, but if he be not of stout heart and sound disposition let us ask him not to linger, for in the yard, which is usually so closely guarded from the public eye, a sordid drama is being enacted. It is there that a couple of hundred birds are forcibly fed through tin tubes so as to enlarge the size of their livers: it is indeed pitiful to witness the struggles of those innocent birds vainly endeavouring to escape from the buxom farmer's wife, who ruthlessly wrings their fair white necks with her shiny, red hands ——

Woman's hands!

Woman's hands, those light, restful ones of Claudia's!

Woman's hands, those of the fair Hortense, who presently emerges from the house to feed

her father's pigs. She throws them a handful or two of garbage, then thoughtfully draws her two hands, fingers outspread, along the front of her dress, while she slowly walks back, engrossed in her thoughts.

Women's hands!

Among the other sources of interest in the town of Limon, there are several commodious shops and interesting shopkeepers. The young maids and matrons are much given to visiting the butcher. He is quite a favourite, although his best jokes, repeated to me by my maid, appear to be remarkably unsavoury. Another favourite is Gogg, the chemist. The beautiful glass globes in his windows are dazzling on a winter's night. He possesses what we all imagine to be a priceless collection of old pottery jars. He is a nervous little man, and one of his eyelids twitches in a confidential sort of way, entirely without his knowledge,

each time he is asked a question. It appears to his customers as if he was sharing with them an intimate and precious secret. The doctor is also a friend of mine, and I often used to consult him about an imaginary illness when I was staying with Claudia at the château. He had such a placid way of giving very sound advice on the little ills which are cured by lying in bed and keeping warm, and he made no pretence at knowing anything at all about surgery or the more complex maladies that the modern Harley Street specialists cope with so efficiently. At one time this placid little man had a serious quarrel with his wife. It all happened a long time ago, and there was much talk about it in the village. I think I now know the truth of it all, through the intimacy of my maid with Rondejambe, the Count's butler.

It appears that Hortense had been engaged by the doctor to do the housework, in the

absence of madame. And very efficiently she did it, too. She even managed, with considerable success, and all by herself, to cook and serve the weekly dinners that the cronies, Gogg, the doctor and the curé indulged in every Sunday. She said they were no trouble, and indeed were very welcome, as these gentlemen were so easily satisfied and lavish in their praise of her culinary talents and her youthful appearance. When they left in the evening, as she helped them on with their coats and mufflers, they would deftly slip a few francs into the pocket of her apron or the front of her dress.

Where there are many tongues rumour travels fast. And soon the doctor's wife, like an ill wind, arrived suddenly full of wrath and spleen. Unfortunately Hortense failed to give her satisfaction, try as she might. The only peace she ever got was when her mistress was in church or paying her weekly call at the

presbytery. One day while she was there, the good doctor, in the kindness of his heart, thought he would continue giving the girl instruction in geography, literature and the little refinements of speech which she had no opportunity of learning at the village school.

Hortense was sitting at the big table in the dining-room, with her thumbs in her ears to keep out the noise, repeating to herself, "Rome on the Tiber, the seat of the Pope." The good doctor, always in the kindness of his heart, was encouraging her with a few gentle taps on the back. It was at that moment that madame chose to enter. She did not understand, nor would she listen to the doctor's simple explanation. She made a scene, a memorable scene. At dinner-time her cheeks were still flushed. The curé, who was dining, noticed that something was amiss, and was all agog to hear the news he soon wormed out of them. Poor Hortense was a sorry spectacle; her eyes

and nose were red and she sniffed in an uncontrolled and perilous way as she handed round the dishes. The curé felt very sorry for her. She was, one might say, one of his ewe lambs. He had baptized and confirmed her, and knew that she was not really wicked. So after dinner, when the tablecloth was removed and they were sitting round the table, self-consciously fingering the family album, he remarked that in his opinion the only thing to do was to find another situation for her. It was more than he could stand to see the treatment she was receiving in that house. He was disappointed that the doctor's wife did not show a more Christian disposition and a little more of the milk of human kindness. He said that, rather than see Hortense work herself to death for such scant emolument, he would take her into his own household. The doctor's wife was distinctly annoyed, and did not feel at all inclined to let Hortense go to the curé's, and

I do not know how she would have replied had not the girl herself at that moment opened the door, and flung her folded apron on the table, announcing her intention of going home that very night to her mother's. The little household settled down after this, and the good doctor was seen placidly driving his dog-cart along the roads on his charitable errands. He may have been called away a little oftener than before to patients living a few miles away, but that did not matter, and it would all help towards filling the Christmas stocking.

One day, as the doctor's wife was calling at the curé's house on her weekly errand, the door was opened by Hortense, who was looking particularly fresh and pretty. Madame was so upset that she did not go to confession that week; so the curé, obeying the call of duty, bravely bearded her in her den. This was just what she wanted, and the good lady unburdened her soul in a very unrestrained manner.

The curé left the house, grieved that he had misjudged the bitterness of her tongue and the marvellous range of her vocabulary.

Late that night the good doctor was called to the bedside of a patient, and on his way home he considerably thought he would stop and enquire how fared his colleague, the curé. The two conspirators had a long and intimate talk over a bottle of very old Chartreuse, and separated on the doorstep the best of friends.

The butcher, a few days after, announced to his eager customers that Hortense had benefited so well by her lessons from the doctor that she had taken a little house by the river, adjacent to her mother's yard, where she proposed to practice as a district nurse, doing a little first aid and also midwifery. Both the curé and the doctor often required her services, and in a modest way she became a useful member of the little community.

VII

THE castle was a beautiful old building, standing bolt upright on the Loire. The inhabited part stands on a terrace up a steep little hill, but the tower that is still used as the main staircase begins at the river-bed and reaches up past the terrace and finishes with a pointed lead roof right up in the sky. The view from the terrace is amusing. There are a number of boats going up and down, although traffic nowadays is mostly conducted along the roads. It must have been amusing at the time when Héloïse and Abelard sailed down the river, pursued by the old dean, to have watched the barges full of passengers and their horses going up and down between the mouth of the river and Orleans. No doubt from this very terrace many a lonely and bored Countess de

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Limon watched the tired passengers and envied their lot.

The most habitable of the reception-rooms was the library, where modern French windows gave on to the terrace. A very few stunted flowers grew round the walls, but the Count thought that flowers were not in keeping with the style of the place and also that they were common. In the midst of the terrace was a well-head about which rather unpleasant stories were told, some gruesome, some simply silly and brutal.

At first it was fun for Claudia to sit at the head of her own table, wearing one of her new tea-gowns; and very charming she looked, exerting herself to please and amuse the old folk who came to have a look at the Count's bride. They talked about neighbours whom she had never seen and scandals which should have been dead and buried long ago; about what the Archbishop had said about the last

curé but one. Then they wondered about the next shooting season and the hunting with the new pack. Claudia looked forward immensely to the autumn. There seemed to be so many amusements in store for her.

The Count was very pleased with her. She never interfered with any of his household arrangements. At first she had wanted to alter a few things — some furniture in the library, where they used to sit in the evenings, and the arrangement of the dinner-table — but he had explained that his mother had always had things done this way and there seemed no reason to change. The only thing about which the stupid child would not agree — and that was quite inexplicable — was that she stubbornly refused to go to church on Sundays. When he insisted upon a reason she simply said: "Why should I? There is no God." It was a ridiculous answer, and made him realise that he had done a risky thing in marrying

a person who, being half American, could not be entirely civilised. But, after all, she was quite amenable and much less odd than he had feared. Coming out of church, when the people would respectfully stand aside waiting for him to pass, he would explain that the Countess was feeling a little tired and could not come to church that morning, and everyone would smile and think that it was quite natural. Truly, Claudia did not feel well. She thought it must be the dry summer they were having, or taking no exercise, or perhaps the different climate, but she certainly felt very unwell, especially in the morning; and all day she felt most extraordinarily sleepy. She went to sleep in the oddest places, sometimes even when she went out for a walk. She used to stop for a rest, and fall asleep on the side of the road — surely a very undignified thing for a Countess to do. The Count used to tease her about it.



One day when she felt less well than usual, the Count noticed that she was very pale, and he said to her that evening:

"My dear, you are looking very pale. Do you not think that a little rouge would become you? Believe me, try a little. I do not want to have a little ghost sitting at my fireside. It is enough to have them in the turrets and passages."

Claudia laughed and said, "It is a very odd thing, Robert, but I feel quite tired. I do hope I am not going to have measles again."

"You silly child," he said, "do you mean to tell me that you do not know what is the matter with you? Why, I have known for weeks. You are going to present me with a small Robert."

"What!" said Claudia. "Do you really mean that?"

"Why, of course I do."

"Well, that is odd. I never thought of

anything like that. Of course you know best. It will be fun having a baby of one's own. I do not think I have ever seen a new baby, not an absolutely new one; not newer than a month."

The days wore on quite peacefully. There were many books to read, as she had never read anything but school-books or books specially written for girls. Guy de Maupassant's terrible book, "Une Vie," appeared quite unnecessarily horrible, but the story was told with such skill that it left a very great impression on her. Robert Louis Stevenson was much more to her liking, though after Maupassant he did not seem as realistic, as there was none of the undercurrent of morbidness that Maupassant infused into the most ordinary events of an ordinary life. Dickens was restful and charming. The hundreds of characters made ever-changing scenes like the strands in a tapestry which comes out even-

tually in a beautiful clean pattern. The Count's mother had collected every English novel of the Victorian times, but these were only taken up when Claudia was tired of reading to herself and got her English maid to read aloud.

John kept a letter that must have been written by his sister at about this time. Here it is:

MY DEAR ONE —

It seems incredible that I should have been so lazy; it is months since I wrote to you, and I have been thinking about your dear letter such a lot.

How nice it is that your little lady should be so kind to you. Do you know, the other day when I drove over to Tours to see old Madame Danton, I looked at the magazines and photographs on her piano, and found a

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nice photograph of your lady. I think it must have been taken some time ago, as the dress is rather old-fashioned. She is holding a white poodle in her arms. Her eyes must be very lovely, and she has a charming smile.

The party sounds great fun, and I am sure you must have looked quite grown-up. Do you dance better now? I wonder if those little German Courts are anything like Mark Twain makes them out to be? Do tell me more about the life there, and the old Grand-Duchess.

This place is not quite as we thought, but it is very beautiful; I am sure you will like it. Some time, perhaps, we may be able to have rides together and long walks in the woods, just as we used to imagine so long ago. Do you like being a man? I do not think I very much like being a woman. Everyone thinks I am very lucky, having such a nice home and

more dresses than I can wear. I daresay I shall soon get accustomed to the change. We never thought how things would be when we were grown-up, or at least we imagined them differently. After all, never having been told what life was really like, we could not guess at anything so totally different from our life together. It is a question of settling down to new conditions, and may take a little time.

I hope you will have very long holidays at Christmas; then we shall be able to go to all the plays that we always wanted to see, all the restaurants that we have heard such a lot about, and perhaps even to some of those places in Montmartre that the Count knows so well. Won't that be fun?

Do please send me a few of the new German novels. I have not read any for ages. I like hearing about the fights. Can you get some photographs of the students with their

faces all cut about? Please don't let them cut yours, and write often, dear one, to

Your devoted and ever-loving twin,

CLAUDIA.

The months seemed to have dragged by very wearily, but Claudia was amused doing up nurseries and reading books entitled "What a Young Mother Should Know," "The Care of the Young," and similar enlightening literature.

However, it was not sufficiently enlightening, because she never understood what was going to happen. Perhaps it was because the books were English that the authors, not approving of torture, made no mention of it.

Claudia had a bull-dog and a Persian kitten. The bull-dog was an angel, according to Claudia. He had the brightest wit and the warmest heart that a dog ever had, and the loveliest continuous snore, so you couldn't

feel lonely when he was there. He got very little exercise, as Claudia rarely went out now that the weather was cold. He used to warm himself by the fire, and then get up and flop down on a cool part of the floor near the window. Sometimes he put his cold nose into Claudia's hand as she sat dreaming hour after hour in the dark library. He didn't mind the cat very much. She was very young and performed amusing antics on the edge of a glass screen painted with water-lilies and plovers, a work of art of the Count's mother. The kitten had a trick of hiding herself in odd places when her bedtime came, and the nightly hunt under or over the furniture got rather on the Count's nerves. The pets knew very well that they were not allowed in Claudia's room at night, so they made every effort to go up there, even going so far as to hide there in the daytime, in their efforts to stay with her. In the morning they came bounding in. The cat made

one leap from the door to the bed. The bulldog hastened with all his slow speed, and then they tumbled about together in the maddest way, noisily greeting each other in the excess of their joy.

For eleven generations all the young Roberts and Robertas had been born in the Castle. Successive cries and wails had issued from behind the double door of the large room where the Countess lay. The furniture had scarcely been changed since the first Countess, in 1486, had proudly presented her radiant lord with a handsome boy, only a few months after the castle was completed. Since then, in direct descent, eleven generations had done precisely the same thing in much the same way. There was no earthly reason for Claudia to differ. No question arose about her going to Paris. She asked if she might be taken there, and was told she might not. Of course she did not argue. The only concession made was that



a great specialist was to be called in if she were really in danger.

Brownie was in the house, and all the funny little toy things were arranged neatly in the new nursery. At least the wall-paper in the nursery was new, and came from Harrod's. It was washable, as was everything in the room, even the furniture and the fire-irons. It was a model nursery, and would have done great credit even to a flat in Madison Avenue, if it had not been for the small windows crossed with heavy iron bars which reminded one that this was the Château de Limon. Claudia was indifferent, did not worry much, even to the last few weeks of discomfort; then suddenly, one evening after dinner, she began to feel ill. After that, in quick succession, every sort of horror descended upon her. First the doctor, with his awful, hairy hands, none too clean; then the arrival of Hortense, bustling and inquisitive. Claudia's own maid was kept

away. She asked for Brownie, who came in, and Claudia, trembling with fear, begged her to get the Paris doctor.

The poor old lady was quite overcome, but she promised to do her best. Before the doctor arrived there were seventeen long hours of agony. No martyr, renowned for his fortitude, whose virtues are celebrated in the hymns and litanies, ever suffered for his faith half as much as this poor innocent child, from no fault of her own. At last the doctor arrived, gave a narcotic to the mother, and saved both her and the child.

Claudia was unconscious for several days and extremely ill. Brownie told me that she was quite afraid to look at her, she was so thin and grey. She hadn't a trace of looks left. She looked like a young bird whose large head dangles loosely at the end of his stringy neck.

One day about midday she was asleep, and a

ray of sunshine struck across the bed on to her face. She stirred and opened her eyes. She smiled at Brownie and said:

“ I am still here, am I? ” Poor Brownie was very much affected, and patted her hand and kissed her and called her her sweetheart, her poor brave girl. Hortense went out of the room, but soon came back holding a bundle, which she deposited beside the poor thing on the pillow. Claudia could not understand what it was.

“ But, madame, it is the *petit bonhomme*, the young Count.”

“ Oh! ” said Claudia. “ Take it away.”

That evening the Count came and sat by the bed, holding his wife’s hand.

“ I think,” said Claudia, “ I shall call him John, after my brother. It is a he, is it not? ”

“ Hush, hush! ” said the Count. “ His name is Robert.”

Two great tears fell slowly down her

cheeks, and she turned her face away, saying, "I think I want to be alone."

Both Brownie and her maid took a strong line, and decided that Hortense, although she would be left in charge of the nursery, was not to come near the sick-room. Between them they managed to keep the Count away as much as possible. They endeavoured to distract their patient by every device in their power, and found that she willingly played her part in any little amusement that they planned for her. She was thoughtful of their comfort, amiable, and indifferent, but she often wanted to be alone. She never spoke about her illness or the baby, and very seldom referred to the Count.

Slowly Claudia began to mend. The specialist came from Paris for the last time. The Count said to him as he was leaving:

"Do you think my wife's mind is at all affected by what she has gone through?"

"I do not think so," said the doctor.  
"Why do you think that?"

"Oh, nothing much, but each time I mention the baby and talk about its future, she says 'Do what you like; the baby's yours.' It's a funny way to put it."

"Don't worry," said the doctor. "Try and give her a good time. If I were you, I think I should take her to the South of France, for a change."

Soon Claudia was carried downstairs to the library. It was pleasant to be back there in her own big chair by the fireside, with the dog and the cat. It was funny, singling out books whose gay bindings looked attractive on the big shelves which lined the walls. Brownie, perilously perched on a ladder, would fetch them down. What a perpetual delight it was, opening those wonderful books and making a choice of what one was going to begin next. It was an unfailing source of

joy, and the game would last a long time, until Claudia was surrounded by volumes of every size and colour to choose from at her leisure.

Brownie read the Society columns of the daily papers regularly to Claudia, who listened in her listless way. One day, as she was reading, her face suddenly flushed and she left the room rather hurriedly, on an obviously futile pretext. Claudia mechanically picked up the paper and read:

“A marriage has been arranged and will take place shortly between Felix, only son of the Marquis and Marchioness de Foljambe, and May, daughter of the late Mr. John W. Johnson and Mrs. Johnson, *née* Dean.”

When Brownie came back Claudia had dropped the paper and was quietly working at her *petit point* needlework.

She wrote to me fairly regularly — about once a fortnight — long letters that were al-

most a diary of her life. In the one she wrote me some time after this announcement appeared in the papers, she enclosed a letter from Molly. The audacious creature had actually written to her! This is the letter. I have the original in its bold handwriting in front of my eyes as I type this:

MY DARLING CHILD —

Since my return from the States I have been continually busy with my little May. The child is wildly happy. As you know, she is all I have got left in the world. Her heart is set upon having this one man as her husband, and mine is too weak to resist her desire. You know, she met Felix first when he was at the Embassy, in Washington; she was such a baby then, he appeared to her in the light of a hero! She knows nothing at all about her dear Aunt Fay's accidental death, and we hope she never will. Long ago, you will perhaps remember,

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darling, that I told you something about it and it appeared to you then in a very terrible light. Your father had asked me to do it. Loving you as I did, I thought that I could best protect you by becoming a *second mother* to you. I acted for the best and did what I thought was required to put you off, although I daresay I perhaps exaggerated certain incidents to make them appear more important. Now that you see yourself that you made a mistake, and are so radiantly happy with your dear husband, you will scarcely remember all this, but my ridiculous conscience bids me write you before my little girl's wedding to put all this straight. My own life is at an end, and I pray that all the sufferings I have had may show me the way to make my child happy by laying my experience of the world and of its sorrow at her feet.

When the wedding is over, do let me come to you, my other daughter, my sweet Claudia,

and see how happy you are in your lovely home, with your dear husband and the darling child. I long for a sight of you.

Your devoted friend for all time,

MOLLY.

Among the people who came more or less regularly to Limon was a relation of the Count's — Sir Horatio Limon. He belonged to the English branch of the family. They had fled the country a few days before the massacre of St. Bartholomew, and had settled in Yorkshire. There they lived in a mean, thrifty way, treated by the French branch of the family with good-natured contempt. This was before the birth of Horatio. Horatio was born to finance, as Napoleon was born to be a soldier. At a very early age he gave unmistakable signs of a genius for figures. He was already well on the road to prosperity when, in his thirtieth year, he presented his aged parents with a beautifully illuminated

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set of plans for the restoration, enlargement, modernisation, etc., of the family seat, Breeke-thorpe House. While the building was in progress the old people went to live at the Rectory. It was a very cold winter and they both succumbed to a severe chill which they caught one evening when they foolishly set out to admire the Palladian summer-house by moonlight. Horatio promptly set his workmen to build a memorial to their memory. It was a great success, and for a long time after the sad event he used to come down every week-end to see that the base of the memorial was suitably covered with flowers in memory of his beloved dead. He was an only child. His birth, occurring when they had long given up all hope of progeny, gave his parents the greatest joy of their lives. He was always good to them and never for one moment caused them the slightest sorrow. Now at the age of fifty-eight, he was one of the

wealthiest landowners in the country. He still dabbled in high finance — lived in princely style and was entirely happy. He had a hobby — a charming hobby, which proved to be the best he could have chosen, as his interest in it never flagged. It was one of the most complicated schemes for benefiting other people that had ever been conceived.

He began composing wills when he was quite a lad. At first he made simple ones, leaving his imagined possessions to institutions for cats, dogs, medical and other colleges, etc. Then he became interested in the ex-presidents of the South American republics and worked for hours on lists of their offspring and descendants. Then his heart took a beautiful turn for exiled monarchs and he spent many a delightful evening planning surprises for them. Later still, he took an interest in the impoverished princely houses of Middle Europe. But finally he was inspired to be-

queath his worldly goods to the second sons of British peers who were not provided for. It was a wonderful inspiration. Second sons were always changing. They were being born — they were becoming eldest sons — they were having accidents in the hunting-field — they were being provided with fortunes by other relations. Never did "Uncle Horatio's" interest flag. Even in his hours of relaxation his mind often dwelt upon his charitable plans. Every ornament, every piece of bric-à-brac, every picture, each one of his possessions was inscribed by him with a hidden number which corresponded to a reference in his will or to one in the codicils attached to it. Often while engaged in conversation he would thoughtfully take up an ornament, look at its number and quietly leave the room to check its position in his complicated system of docketing.

Claudia had never actually seen Uncle Ho-

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ratio. The Count, now that his relation enjoyed such an exalted position, was always anxious to make a show when he came to stay at Limon. Uncle Horatio was supposed to be something of a connoisseur in food and pictures, and to take a fatherly interest in the ladies. One side of his character interested Robert as much as his other side interested Claudia, so they both looked forward very eagerly to his arrival.

Some time after Claudia was about again, taking timid walks on the terrace or what the "Young Mother's Guide" calls "gentle carriage exercise" along the forest roads, "Uncle Horatio" announced his approaching visit. The Count was overjoyed and ordered a few special provisions to be made in his honour. He telegraphed to Strasbourg and ordered a *pâté de foie gras* in a special crust, of a certain weight and thickness. To Périgord he despatched one of the kitchen underlings to buy

the biggest and blackest truffles. To York he sent a special messenger from his club in St. James' to select the fattest ham that county could produce. To the U.S.A. he cabled, ordering a dozen best canvas-backed ducks to be shipped in the *Laurentia*, but I doubt if the latter arrived in time.

While all these preparations were being made, the servants' hall was naturally in a state of exaltation. The butler and cook were very much on their mettle, the English nobleman being very highly thought of in the servants' hall. Sometimes, in the evening, the butler, Rondejambe, would consent to have a little chat with Hortense — yes, the same Hortense, the doctor's Hortense, the curé's Hortense — in the pantry, when she came to fetch the bottle of beer and tray of sandwiches which were always kept in readiness in case the wet nurse went dry in the night.

Naturally the arrival of this distinguished

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guest was the subject of specially thrilling stories which the old rascal poured into her willing ear. She was a good listener, and she listened with an almost passionate interest. She adored hearing about the brilliant, wicked world "above-stairs." Already she was becoming ambitious, already she imagined herself in a different walk of life; it was often a shock to her to look at the apron around her trim waist just when she was dreaming what she would say to the rich banker when he gave her the pearls.

One night M. Rondejambe was so enthralled that the girl stayed an unusually long time listening to him. She gave quite a start when the big clock over the sink chimed the hour, and, blushing rosy-red, exclaimed:

"My! Mr. Paul, what will the master say?" Which cryptic remark left the old *raconteur* in a state of unsatisfied curiosity until the next evening.

The great day arrived, and all was in readiness. But, alas! even as he descended from his rather high brown touring-car, it was plain to see that Sir Horatio was not at his best. He listened politely but with a vacant smile to the greetings of his host and hostess, and retired to his room almost immediately to rest before the evening meal.

At dinner the conversation flagged and the distinguished guest hardly touched the appetising stuff as it appeared upon the table. When Claudia left the room, English fashion, and the men sat over their wine, Count Robert insisted upon knowing the reason for his guest's moroseness. The answer was a disappointment to him; it was a story about women, but not an entertaining one.

Uncle Horatio had just heard, a few minutes before his departure from Paris, that the Duke of Cornhill's second son, who was just under age, had run away with a woman who would

not be a fit mother for his children. It was the first time since his last beautiful idea about his will that such a thing had occurred. Second sons usually married as sanely as eldest sons did not. He was puzzled and bewildered. What made it worse was that his valet had forgotten to pack the attaché-case which contained a travelling copy of his will. The poor old gentleman was quite fussed. Limon, who was a man of resource, decided to try and calm his guest's nerves and amuse him to the best of his ability, and so try and make up for his little disappointment. He proposed to send a special envoy to get the precious document which had been forgotten. Until this arrived he would provide the "Gotha," an old "Red Book" and sundry works on heraldry which would be a great help and solace to Uncle Horatio. In quite a different order of things he was able to offer his guest the best, i.e., the ministration of that celebrated *mas-*

seur, Mr. Corset, who was now at Limon. This would ensure his dear uncle having a restful sleep after the worries he had had to contend with during the day.

The *masseur* was a marvel. He could talk and rub, rub and talk, a dozen people into health, good-humour and vigour every day. His establishment in Paris was known all over the civilised world. His very stammer was attractive. His stock of stories quite remarkably good. His patients chaffed him about his matrimonial difficulties and about his old lady patient who had left him the big house which he now used in Paris for his wonder-working. His private life was often discussed in the best clubs of the Champs Elysées and St. James', just as if he had been "one of us."

He gambled like a gentleman, took wine with the best of them, and was one of the most popular men of his day.

Sir Horatio came down to lunch looking

more like his usual self. His attentions to the Countess were very charming to behold. He enquired about her health, offered her his arm for her afternoon stroll, and even asked to see the young heir, and regretted that he was asleep.

“Lucky age that, when one sleeps so easily at any hour of the day. A short nap is such a good thing; keeps the little devils quiet. Can’t do that now, Count, frowsty old men like us.”

When lunch was over they settled down to their papers and Claudia to her needlework. The strong black coffee did not suffice to keep his lordship awake, and he followed the example of the lucky little devil in enjoying a quiet nap behind the Continental edition of the *Daily Mail*. The afternoon was spent by the two men in inspecting the grounds and coverts, and before dinner they indulged in a quiet game of b  zique. It was Sir Horatio’s

habit to have an hour to himself before his evening meal. He then took what he called his "Turkish bath."

It was a queer portable affair, which was carefully packed with his things and taken wherever he went. On the floor was an ordinary oil lamp covered by a square wooden stool protected in the middle by a piece of asbestos. He sat on the stool, wrapped closely in a blanket, for about an hour. Every few minutes his valet, Rifleman Ellis, would lift a corner of the blanket to see if his master were safe. This simple treatment was supposed to be a certain cure for gout and rheumatism, and it no doubt helped his lordship to maintain the slim outline of his aristocratic figure.

Corset was summoned. He slapped, he punched, and he rolled between his clever fingers the soft and rather tender tissues of this exalted person. The *masseur* was in great good humour. He had sat at lunch beside

the charming Mademoiselle Hortense — the same Hortense, the doctor's Hortense, the curé's Hortense — and had been quick to discover in this retiring country flower a person of sensitive nature and open mind. It was wicked waste keeping her in the country when she might be gracing a Paris drawing-room. Her charming qualities would never get their full appreciation as long as she stayed in Limon. Eyes like hers were not made to gaze upon grass like a cow in a field. Those hands should display jewels, not carry trays. A figure such as hers to wear an apron — ugh! Doucet himself should dress her. The curé's ewe lamb listened distractedly to the music of his stammer, as the tempter painted in glowing colours the fate that would await her in the capital. Lovely gay dreams dreamt she that night in her innocent little cottage bedstead. Corset, in the fullness of his heart, had determined to make the girl's happiness. She

was a grateful creature, and endowed with a loving disposition.

Sir Horatio was carefully perusing an Almanach de Gotha of 1892 as Corset delicately kneaded his emaciated thighs. The *masseur* tried to get him interested in Hortense, telling him what a treasure the house contained and what a pity it was that such a treasure should remain hidden, as it were, under a bushel. But he may have bored his lordship. At any rate, he answered not a word, and dismissing him asked for the services of the Rifleman.

With the arrival of the messenger bearing his precious documents Sir Horatio seemed to recover his spirits. The gifted Corset, who understood the *nuances* of his patron's humours was delighted to see him taking quite a human interest in those amusing little stories of the turf, the stage or the bar, which he told so well. His lordship even graciously enquired about Mademoiselle Hortense, and

praised the scheme for her welfare and advancement. When he met the girl in his infrequent visits to the nursery he showed her a most becoming fatherly benevolence which quite touched the heart of the old *masseur*.

He gratified his host and hostess by accepting to be godfather to the young Count. On the whole, this visit turned out to be most successful and sealed the friendship of the two middle-aged gentlemen. Before he left, Sir Horatio made the Count promise to bring his young wife to Paris in the spring, there to enjoy all the gaieties of the capital.

They, however, did not go there for several months — not till Christmas, in fact, as the Count had to superintend some structural alterations and renovations at the château.

VIII

THE Count made up his mind that they would go to Paris, and he decided that Claudia was to be the fashionable woman of that year. He liked people to envy him his possessions. Nothing pleased him more than when one of his friends tried to bribe his butler or his cook to leave his service. No one had as yet made a fuss about his wife. It is true that as yet no one had seen her. Her figure was fuller than it should have been. Her skin was roughened by the winter winds, her clothes were, of course, hopelessly out of date. Poor Claudia!

That year extreme slimness was the thing in Paris, and black dresses were worn in the evening next to the skin, so that it was necessary first of all to correct any heaviness of figure. The Count had a consultation with his friend

Mr. Corset, and the next morning Claudia for the first time entered the portal of his sanctuary.

Mr. Corset himself greeted her in the sumptuous drawing-room of his mystery-house. He was very benign and encouraging. There was nothing one could not do for the figure if one took the thing in time — that was the real secret. The first ounce of fat, a visit to Corset's, and off it comes. Papa Corset, all the ladies called him: he was very popular.

Some attendants were summoned, the patient taken to a large oblong box filled with electric bulbs, there to be left simmering for twenty minutes. Then, disguised in a rubber cap and flannel wrapper, one was ushered into a room filled with vapour but otherwise empty of occupants save for Corset himself, standing behind a counter which looked like a bar, covered with shiny copper handles connected to a powerful jet. The patient stood before

him, supported by a sort of railing, the boiling-hot and icy-cold spray left one too giddy to stand upright and too indifferent to mind Papa's searching gaze.

In the massage-room two powerful eunuchs took possession of the patient, who was then treated with great severity and cruelly rubbed with a horsehair glove. On another floor her face was treated with electricity. This was painful and very frightening. The sparks from the powerful electric plant flew across one's face, and the nerves could hardly stand the jarring noise of the different wheels and engines that were continually buzzing in the large domed room.

While she was dressing to go home Papa Corset came in and gave Claudia a few ideas of what one should wear under one's dress. What she had bought before her wedding was evidently quite wrong. Poor Claudia felt sore and uncomfortable. Her face was quite

changed. She had a very white-and-pink appearance which did not suit her dark skin and hair. It took her a long time to find out what colours to use and how best to show off her own good points. The Count, however, declared himself delighted with the success of this first treatment, and persuaded her to continue. As she had nothing at all to do in Paris, there was no reason why she should not go on with it, and after a while Corset's amused her. She met several old friends there and made the acquaintance of some odd women who amused her and gave her useful tips. . . .

One day she was amused to recognise under the flannel wrapper, as they crossed each other in a corridor, her old friend from Limon, Hortense, the same Hortense, the doctor's Hortense, the curé's Hortense, now known to the world of gallantry as Bébé Printemps. Some say that she was named after a mechanical doll

which was being then sold at every fashionable store, as experts saw a resemblance between the automaton and the charming young lady. This may be nothing less than a base slander.

IX

BÉBÉ PRINTEMPS!

A *grande cocotte*, rich, adulated, popular. Her name, Bébé Printemps, which suited her wonderful complexion and ruddy hair, was as well known as the Place de la Concorde. Her house in the Etoile quarter was the meeting-place of several shining lights in the political world, one of her principal supporters being the great Sarceneau himself, a powerful brain allied to a fragile body, but whose heart was large enough to contain all the kindness and understanding of a Buddha. Such was Sarceneau. I really believe he was sincerely attached to Bébé Printemps, *née* Hortense. She was a patient listener, a tender friend. Her house formed a refuge from that overpowering Ministry of Foreign Affairs where he never

could relax for a minute the tension of his brain. Here he could rest and discuss with a few friends subjects which it would have been unwise to mention even in a whisper at the Bureau de M. le Ministre. The food at her house was excellent, and the salons numerous enough to allow free intercourse to those who did not want to be disturbed.

After dinner in France the men leave the room with the women, but after a few polite words to their neighbours they slink off to re-assemble over their cigars in the privacy of the smoking-room. It is true that the doors of the room are open. They can catch glimpses of the pretty women grouped coquettishly round the fireside, talking with the very young young men of the party. Then, later, when all has been said, they stroll back and quietly oust the poor gigolos from their place at the ladies' feet.

There was a mysterious power about Sarceneau that frightened all the women that he came across. His power was almost that of a Dictator, and he had the reputation of giving short shrift to anyone whom he had reason to mistrust. Bébé alone, of all the women in Paris, fortified by her quite limitless stupidity, did not fear him any more, or perhaps rather less, than she feared the fashionable Alsatian wolfhound which she took out with her in the morning. The great man's benign kindness seemed to her the natural expression of those feelings which she appreciated without reciprocating. It is believed that she did not even notice that his nerves were under a terrific strain, and that his brain was taxed to its utmost limits in those terrible days that preceded the war. He was fighting for his country and vainly looking for a way out of the mire of anti-militarist and socialist propaganda which

threatened to annihilate the great work begun in 1871 which by a superhuman effort he was striving to complete.

When he came to her in the evening he found a beautiful woman, quietly dressed and alone by her fireside. She would stroke his forehead or give him some aspirin, which she mixed herself in a tumbler of water, pretending to keep the servants away and ministering to his little wants to the best of her ability. She really did help him to recover his equanimity. She had a trick of looking at him with her brown eyes all the time he was speaking, and she never interrupted. It might have been because she never understood what he said, yet if there was any little thing he wanted, i.e., a cigar, a match, a glass of brandy, the telephone, writing materials, etc., she guessed what it was before he asked for it. Goodness knows how much this beautiful semi-

imbecile did to restore France's greatest patriot to the marvellous poise which enabled him to prepare and complete the mobilisation of several millions of undisciplined people of all stations and almost any age, in five days.

X

CLAUDIA's thoughts were entirely taken up with her brother.

She tried to remember his last visit. It had been one of those afternoons when the Count had filled the house with a crowd of fashionable people who played bridge and lounged about smoking cigarettes and drinking cocktails. Claudia had seen John standing in the doorway, looking at her, and she had rushed to him. What exactly had he said? "I am called back to the regiment. There is going to be war. Hush, don't tell anyone. Don't fuss." He was gone.

Claudia left for Limon. It is there she wrote that letter which I found waiting for me at my hotel on my return from the States, and which brought me to her side.

July, 1914.

He has gone to the War. WAR, Judith. What does that word mean? Do *you* know? One remembers names of wars and dates — the Wars of the Roses, the Thirty Years' War. Can a war really last thirty years? Those engravings in the passages at Limon — "Passing the Rhine" horses trampling armed men underfoot, a knee on someone's chest, an arm brandishing a sword, an arrow from a turret — but not modern warfare. They all say it cannot last more than a few weeks. Modern weapons are so powerful, nothing remains of a regiment if it is shelled. Cavalry will be wiped out, they will all be killed — Oh, God! Judith, killed! be seen no more — rotting in the ground, or maimed, spoilt, no legs, or blinded.

Tell me, is there a God to propitiate, to kneel to, to pray to for mercy? Is there a sacrifice one can make? But would He hear? Would He answer? John has never harmed

anyone. He loved his friends in Heidelberg. Now they have taken him into the slaughter-house and told him to kill his friends. Maybe God understands us humans, but, oh! we do not understand God.

I went to her in those terrible days of suspense, but I was of very little use. She hardly noticed that I was there. The dread of the unknown seemed to dig deeper and deeper into her soul, and her loneliness and anxiety drove her to interminable walks and rides. After three days of complete agony, as we were walking together to the village church, a drum was heard below, by the river. It was the Town Crier, reading something to the crowd. We hastened to him, but just as we got near, the church bell began ringing — the TOCSIN, hitherto never heard yet now instantly recognised. That appalling rhythm of death — between the beats, the voice of the Town

Crier, "La guerre — la guerre — la Patrie."

The church a refuge, hysteria very near, the church strangely empty. Then tears. Truly, the relief of tears, the physical dissolution of sorrow, the cast-off pride, the utter humility. O God, have mercy on her soul!

Nothing she did occupied her; her hands worked mechanically, her feet were sore and ached at night, yet she was quite unoccupied. Her heart was like a dead thing and her brain absolutely numb. She did not know where her brother was. For a time she haunted the stations where the cattle-trucks filled with the wounded arrived night and day. Then one day there was an incident. Some mistake had been made, and when she and the other women unlocked the door they found that the poor maimed human cattle imprisoned inside the truck had died of starvation and neglect. After that she did not go to the station.

It was now October, and since August not

a word from her brother. She knew where his regiment was, at least she knew in what district. Though we wrote daily begging the authorities to send some of the wounded to Limon, as we had got everything beautifully ready to receive them, they answered curtly that they would deal with our request in rotation.

One morning about sunrise, the matron came to my room, announcing the first consignment of wounded. Claudia, whose first question was, "What regiment do they belong to?" was disappointed to hear that they were black troops and did not come from anywhere near the North, where she imagined her brother was. Then later, when a little order was restored, the Red Cross officer who had brought this poor lot of suffering humanity asked permission to thank her for the care she had given to his men. Claudia was standing with her back to the fire in the library when

the tall man in uniform came in. She looked at him in her calm way and her face never changed. The man was Felix. She came away from that interview, which lasted a few minutes, with a new light in her eyes. She kissed me and said, "Judith, I am all right now; I have got something to do."

XI

FELIX had been genuinely in love with Claudia when he first saw her, and her marriage had been a bitter blow to him. Not that he felt any bitterness against her personally, since he knew quite well that she was no more responsible for her marriage than a bird is responsible for its plumage. He knew the Count, and was certain that she could not be happy with him. Although Limon was many years his senior, they had really much in common. They had been brought up in the same way, led the same brilliant, hectic life, made love to the fashionable women, spent all their money — and a good deal that was not their own — in the fashionable gambling-rooms. They prided themselves never to have met their match in love nor in sword play. They

were supposed to be as incapable of falling in love as they were incapable of acting ungalantly on the field of honour. They adored showing off, and were a trifle arrogant and overbearing. This pleased the public, and they were both very popular figures on the race-course, in the bars and in drawing-rooms. Claudia's marriage had been indeed such a severe shock that Felix had felt compelled to console himself with a return to his old mode of life. He had a good time, and when he found he had captured the heart of a charming heiress — for Molly's girl had been left a large fortune — he gracefully gave in to Molly's forceful persuasion. He imagined he had now buried the old skeleton, but when he got back from his honeymoon the old feelings got the better of him, and he could not forget his romantic love for Claudia. Since the day at Limon when he met her so unexpectedly, he longed more than ever to prove to her that he

alone was worthy of her love, and what a grievous mistake she had made in not marrying him. He had been amazed when she had told him, very soon after their first meeting, of the story told by his mother-in-law Molly to please the old Prince whom after all she was not destined to marry. He felt that by her trick, Molly had done him out of something which could never be replaced, and this perhaps made him more callous towards his wife.

Felix, from the time of Claudia's marriage, persuaded himself that he was very different from the gross *viveur* she had married. In all his thoughts of Claudia he tried to adopt an attitude entirely different from that of the Count, and so formed a sort of sentimental attitude of mind which became a habit when he thought about her. Unfortunately, all this romance led to nothing satisfactory, from a lover's point of view. Poor Felix,

when he came again to see Madame the Countess de Limon, tried every one of his usually successful moves to no avail. Hampered by his romantic ideal of her — in love, in fact, and therefore blind — he did not understand how Claudia could seriously cling to all the sentimental rubbish which poor Claudia did cling to as a drowning person to a raft. She was suffering from that form of shock which is very common to women brought up, as she had been, in complete ignorance of the simple truths of life. The physical contact that she had to put up with when she married was odious to her, and of course the birth of the child had been a sickening ordeal. Yet she was what one calls a “womanly woman,” and gave the impression of being capable of passion. After a time she began to bore Felix. They met every afternoon and went for long drives in his car through the woods and villages round Paris.

The Felix who came to see me in the flat of the Avenue du Bois was a very much more mature person than the luckless Lothario whom I had taken compassion on in Venice. He seemed very sure of himself and explained at some length how lucky it was for Claudia that he should have met her again just when she so badly needed a friend — a friend such as himself, who could understand every *nuance* of her sensitive nature. I was a little bit annoyed, but could not deny that this was all true. He had indeed come back into Claudia's life at a very opportune moment. I was so busy at the hospital that I could only see her when I got a few days' leave; she had long hours by herself, as the doctor absolutely forbade her to do any nursing. She was too delicate, and anyway was very bad at it. So she came back to Paris, where she expected her brother to come on leave. Felix was really a great boon to her and to me, as he kept her

amused. The situation which he had been creating for years was culminating in this strange wooing; he had often repeated to himself the phrases which now came so glibly to his lips, as for over two years Claudia had been the centre of most of his secret thoughts.

After a few weeks things became more difficult. Claudia was in a new mood; she found more time to spare in the afternoons, and as I was expecting a long vacation from the hospital, she kept talking to Felix about plans, and these plans were always about how we should all go for week-end parties to the country. Felix, however, was very thoughtful at that time. Sometimes he was almost absent-minded. And he spoke much less often about taking her away with him to a land where they would begin a new life together, and the wonderful time they would have in the States, Canada, Australia — any-

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where, away from all the people that they knew and disliked over here.

It was now Claudia who spoke about "the new life together." Felix listened. Felix by this time knew all her gestures and all her intonations, as well as all her tastes and clothes. He no longer passionately longed for her touch; she had made the mistake of very often laying her hand on his. She had a trick of touching his hair with her fingers as she said something very important: how he hated that! Felix, however, was still convinced that he was the only man that she would ever love. That still made Claudia a little interesting to him. She was so sensitive, so fine. The Count was too gross to understand her. He, Felix, was the one man for her.

## XII

### THE Palais Royal!

In the very heart of Paris lies an ancient square associated with ideas of splendour, vice, and money. The Palais Royal was once the rendezvous of the bloods just after the Revolution had let loose upon the capital a torrent of new ideas, new people, new gods. There the fast *jeunesse dorée* lost in gambling what the smart modistes did not spend on their own adornment. There the poets would linger, questing about the fountains the coquettish vision of their elusive muse. There the First Consul, for the good of his liver, strutted with knitted brows, his hands already behind his back in an attitude which was to be famous, and planned the conquest of the world. Under the arcades in their diminutive shops

the jewellers, having erased the royal patents from their windows, calmly professed to belong to no creed and no country. They did good business, and helped to fleece some of the new-rich and cocksure young men who annoyed them by coming in with their necks encased in triple-rowed cravats that all but kept them from speaking, their gold-headed canes precariously balanced in tightly-gloved hands. The young men of the time were continually sampling and buying new watches, after which they would show them to their friends and brag about their quality and workmanship, as they now do about their cars.

The architecture of the place is a masterpiece. The part under the arcades comprises the little shops surmounted by a low mezzanine whose arched windows reach down to the ground. Looking through these windows, the second archway, which is over the covered



walk, makes a hard, black shadow, beyond which there is the clear sunlight of the Place, its sparkling fountains and the dusty-green pollarded trees, stiffly planted in geometrical design.

By what process of elimination has this charming old place become the modern residence of the capital's smartest lovers? One side is consecrated to those passions which, although not blessed with the approval of the Church, are yet by custom tolerated, if not encouraged. The opposite side of the square is reserved for cases more complex and tastes less orthodox. Both sides are so well patronised that it is impossible for the casual stranger who does not know the ropes to obtain the smallest room in this chosen square.

On the "proper" side of the square, where the street that forms the outside of the house is called the Rue des Petits Maîtres, there is a particularly attractive flat. It is situated in a

mezzanine and enjoys a charming view through those half-moon windows which are such an attractive feature of the place. These rooms must have been decorated with a gallant intention at the time of the romantic painters; they are painted in white and gold, with ancient mirrors generously let into the panels. Roses and laurels intertwine in gay profusion over the ceiling, which has a look of being made of discoloured looking-glass, and perhaps it is.

This precious abode had been occupied, for some years, by our charming, gay and debonair friend Felix. His official address was the mansion of Madame his mother in the Faubourg St. Honoré, where he took his American bride after their honeymoon. But it is not there that he spent his most profitable hours. He had never been taught any kind of outdoor game except hunting and shooting, and was particularly good at the indoor game which,

with the careless vulgarity of our day, he would call the "king of indoor-sports." In the old days he could no more live a day without thinking about the impression he was making upon Claudia than he could lay himself down to rest without having tried his hand at his favourite pastime. So of course the flat came in very handy.

Felix's wife May was very busy; her mother-in-law took her out every day to pay calls on all the women who were on her visiting-list, young or old. These were called the *visites de nocés* and were a very important item in a bride's programme. In the evening Felix had to take her out to parties, when there were any, but luckily there were few which the dowager approved of, so May and the old lady would sit by the fire while Felix and his father were supposed to go to the club.

Claudia, of course, often thought about May. She had been introduced to her one day, and

found her to be a little common thing with a humorous but not unpleasant face. She was the sort of hard, smart American whom one instantly knew to be well able to look after herself. Felix's mother liked her; she found her daughter-in-law gay and amusing, she dressed well and fell in readily with any plans that were made for her.

The French women, and most of the men, she was introduced to liked her and quickly formed a sort of circle around her to keep her as much as possible from her husband. Did she mind this neglect? I think she must have. Claudia thought so too, although in general people said she was such a child that she did not care for "that sort of thing," and had no use for her husband.

After a time it was rumoured that Felix had never really broken off his old ways. His American bride he never saw. Claudia was no

use to him. There remained the boon companions of brighter days. Of these many had disappeared with other pre-war luxuries; many were out of fashion. The new star in that world of fashion was Bébé Printemps. She had risen quickly in a few months, and was now all the rage. War made very little difference to the essentials of the gay life in Paris. Felix was independent; his diplomatic career was an excuse for being more or less an *embusqué*. He was often in danger, and was entrusted with very delicate missions, although he spent very much of his time in Paris. He was by no means a coward, but he hated physical discomfort, and his present situation suited him well.

At the club he heard all his friends speaking about this new star. The name of Bébé Printemps fell like a promise about his ears. The club was now more or less the domain of the middle-aged, and any young man coming in on leave was looked upon rather as a child to

be instructed in the latest modes and amusements. So Felix met Béb   one evening, and felt rather out in the cold amongst her hosts of admirers. He was piqued and put out. He began wooing her with his faultless technique and spent most of his evenings at her house. Sarcenau was a rare visitor nowadays, so the evenings in B    's big house were very gay. B     had learned very early in life that her own charms were the only available asset which she possessed. She knew also that the value of these assets varied in proportion to the need of the buyer. She was accustomed to demand a high rate of interest. Sarcenau did not give her jewels, the Count de Limon had very little he could dispose of: this new lover Felix might be able to oblige. She had set her heart upon the possession of a square-cut diamond of huge dimensions, with which she proposed to adorn one of her shapely, plump fingers.

Felix pressed his court: he got but few slight

encouragements; he longed for something more tangible. He begged her, with all the passion of which he was capable, to accede to his wishes and come to his flat. She put him off, asking him to dine with her the next day, as she was having a party for a few old dodderers; Sarcenau himself was to be there. It was an honour to be asked: he accepted. Alas! On getting back to the Faubourg, his mother reminded him that he was taking his wife the next evening to dine with a most important relative, the Duke of Asphodelle. There was nothing to be done. A note was despatched to Bébé, explaining all the sorrow and concern which this contretemps really gave him.

He went there late that night, but was not received. The grim porter simply said that the party was over. For the next few days little progress was made. His afternoons he passed with Claudia and his evenings with Bébé, but they were never alone together. He knew



now that Bébé really did want the diamond: he meant to give it to her if he possibly could. His American bride had made over all her income to her husband, as is the custom in France, but she owned no capital. That was still in the hands of her trustees. The only way in which Felix could raise the sum required for the ring was by mortgaging some of his famous vineyards at Pins-les-Iles. He naturally was rather loath to do this. But Felix was a young man of eighteenth-century impulse, dominated by his desires, or desire. He must have Bébé for his own. He wanted Bébé. He wanted her so much. Besides, the fact that she belonged in a way to his friend Limon, who had discovered her, was an added inducement to press his suit.



### XIII

JOHN came home on leave. Claudia and he had a few wonderful days; they were nearly always together, as if they were trying to cheat time and recover the lost comradeship of their childhood. This left Felix more free to see his new fancy. Claudia appreciated her brother's company and his delightful mind more than she had ever done before. Here was a creature who absolutely understood her, a person moulded after her own heart. He did not, like her husband, expect obscene gestures of her, nor, like her lover, sentimental twaddle. She could be quite natural.

One day John took her to Le Bourget to see the new aeroplanes. He was allowed to take her up with him in a machine that was being tried. She adored it! The ecstasy of flying through the cloudless air in a smooth circle was

almost overpowering; her senses were dazed by this new vista of the world seen from the sky. The sense of adventure was upon her, and she envied him the emotions which he went through daily at the front. A long time afterwards she spoke about this first flight as if it had been a complete revelation of a new world.

They went everywhere together, these two, where people went who wanted to be gay. John saw very little of his girl friend, although he was staying at her flat. He spoke about her less than he used to. Claudia, of course, never mentioned her name. When John left to go back to his regiment, poor Claudia could hardly believe he had gone. She felt acutely the void which he left in her days, and called upon Felix more often to take her out for drives. She now spoke continually about the new life they would lead together in some distant land; John was sometimes included in her plans, and sometimes even myself.

One evening, as Felix was driving Claudia back from one of their long drives in the country, she unexpectedly burst into tears and discoursed upon the loneliness of her evenings and her dread of the long hours in front of her. Since her brother left she had been sleeping badly, and she also missed the gaieties she had been accustomed to while he was on leave. Felix proposed to take her to a play. They would dine at the usual hour in their own homes, and meet at the Palais Royal Theatre where there was a good play on. Claudia was very pleased with the idea, and Felix did not see how it could interfere in any way with his seeing Béb , as there had been nothing arranged for that night. When he got to his club he found a note from her, saying that she would be able to get away that evening, and would be at the flat at ten-thirty. Here was a nice mess! He tried to ring up Claudia, but was answered by the Count, so he could not

leave a message. He looked at his watch — 8.30! He had barely time to dress, swallow a few mouthfuls of dinner and get to the play.

All through the screamingly funny farce he tried to think of a way to get Claudia to leave before the end. She did not notice his abstraction, and laughed a great deal. It was a typical farce, in which people all go to bed in the wrong rooms with the wrong people, and are finally sorted and put back on the path of virtue by enraged mothers-in-law. At last the tedious thing came to an end. Felix did not even attempt to take Claudia home: he simply put her into her carriage, bidding her good-night. With nervous haste he unlocked the door of his flat, to find an enraged Béb  sitting stiffly in a chair, with her coat and hat on, as if she were waiting in a dentist's anteroom. It took a long time and no inconsiderable effort to get her to talk in an ordinary way.

In his agony of mind Felix promised the a few mouthfuls of dinner and get to the play-ring for the morrow. He felt he would do anything in the world to change this icicle into a palpitating woman. Bébé was evidently impressed by the confident way in which he promised her the jewel. She thawed a little, though keeping him at arm's length, and began to converse with dignity about politics and her friends. He was actually relieved when she got up and put an end to this ridiculous scene. In the taxi, taking her home, he regained some of his composure. It was almost second nature to him to make love to the gay sex in these vehicles. This habit stood him in good stead, and he had almost won the day when they got to her lodging, to be greeted by her pompous concierge. It was hard to leave her, and by the time he got home to his own sombre dwelling he felt absolutely unnerved. A bad night tossing on his lonely couch did not improve his condition, although it fortified his

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resolve to give Béb  that which she craved for. The next day he saw his lawyer, his money-lender, his jeweller, and made all arrangements to secure the bauble. By midday, indeed, it was duly sent, with a modest little note, to the charming B   .

He did not ring up Claudia's house till quite late that afternoon. A maid answered the telephone, and said:

"Monsieur does not know! But it is terrible! The young Prince has been killed — the Countess's brother. She is prostrate with grief. The doctor can do nothing to calm her, and she will see no one."

Here was tragedy! He forgot all else and flew to the house. A tearful Claudia saw him for a few minutes. She could only sob and say:

"But I loved him, darling! I loved him! He was mine! I did love him so! They had no right to kill him."

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She was childish and utterly pathetic. She also said once or twice:

“Take me away, darling, take me away.”

He did not answer, except by holding her close and kissing the poor disfigured face. The best of Felix came out in the next few hours. He spent nearly all his time speaking to Claudia on the telephone, or asking her maid how she was. This maid came to him the next morning at dawn with a note from Claudia, begging him to take her away to Pinsles-Iles — if he did not, she wrote, she felt she would go mad! The night had been awful. She could not face another day — another hour — in that terrible house. She must leave. He must take her away. He was the only person living that she cared for, the only person in the world.

By making him happy she felt she could perhaps forget some of her own grief. The time had come to show his devotion. He was



in for it! There was no escape. He told the waiting maid that he would be at Madame's convenience at any time she chose to name. Then he sat down to write a note to Bébé, explaining his departure by pressing affairs connected with a rich old uncle who was dying intestate in the country. While he wrote, her little pink face seemed to smile at him and his heart was torn with longing for her.

"Bébé, the ring is nothing — not at all worthy of you — but you must wear it sometimes for my sake. Bébé darling, when I think about how I shall miss you, I am tempted to throw away all my chances with my uncle and leave him to die without seeing him again; but you know what I want above all, to give you the luxury you should, you must, have, to take you away with me, far, far away to a place where we could be alone together, just you and I. Bébé, don't forget me. I am miserable. FELIX."



## XIV

FELIX'S excessive nervousness stood him in good stead. The man who does not realise the blessing of nerves is indeed handicapped in moments of stress. It portrays all emotion, satisfying the most exacting mistress in a moment. It is self-sufficient, it is complete. One must be clammy of hand and short of temper. One's movements must be abrupt. One may nibble one's moustache, if the fortunate possessor of one. One need hardly talk. All is well. It is the spectator's duty to interpret to his or her liking the cause of this unusual loss of control which may give place, after a time, to extreme humility.

Felix, on the morning of the elopement, had certainly lost all control over his feelings, such as they were, but as he spoke very little, gently

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cursing any little obstacle which interfered with his comfort, the elements, the road, the absent chauffeur, Claudia probably never knew in what an agony of mind he was about this departure. She had chosen going by road, but the train would have been the better way, for in a train those unlucky people who cannot become engrossed in a newspaper or a book can at least think comfortably about their affairs. The railway, to be sure, does not distract one as much as a road, but in this case it would have given Claudia and Felix more leisure for getting accustomed to their new position. On a road even the most indifferent passenger, wrapped up in the most intense self-absorption, cannot but look at the scenery, scan the misleading sign-posts, or even assume the part of guide by studying the map.

It is also impossible to know when and where one will arrive on a long journey. The struggle against wind, cramp or dust, makes one very

sleepy at night, too sleepy sometimes. Claudia's journeys with the Count had been quite perfect, as the whole thing had been carefully planned beforehand. Trust the old Count for that. No distance greater than a hundred miles had been accomplished in any one day, and arrangements for refreshments contained in plentiful hampers and partaken of inside the vehicle were always a nicely-blended mixture of palatable and wholesome delicacies. At night they stopped at the country seat of a relative or a friend, unless the hotel of the place were on the lines of the Ritz or the Carlton, in which case a double suite of rooms, decorated with the usual strange hotel vegetation, was in readiness, even to the extremest detail in the way of hot-water bottles and bath-salts.

Of course Felix, who was also used to travelling in this way, could not get the whole thing organised in the few hours allowed to him by Claudia. That dreadful note to Hortense

Bébé Printemps had taken him such a long time to write — all the available time, in fact, while his valet was packing and his two chauffeurs were getting the cars ready. He intended to drive Claudia himself and have the chauffeurs follow with the maid and valet in the old bus. After travelling for a few hours it became obvious to both of them that this was a mistake. The chauffeur should have been driving, so that Felix could have been persuasive and eloquent.

When they got to the stopping-place for luncheon, Claudia found that her neat hat and coat were much disarranged by the rapid journey, and she felt dowdy beside the smart *demi-mondaines* who were enjoying an *al fresco* meal by the water-side. Felix was in a decidedly ill temper. However, he still put the blame on the roads, the state of the car, the faulty map.

They both cheered up a little after the brandy, and clambered heavily back into their

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cramping positions. There was no sign of the bus, so Felix had to go on driving. This was rather annoying, as the brandy and his last night's emotion were beginning to make him feel very sleepy, and it was with the greatest difficulty that he kept awake. Claudia knew the road well, as it was one she had often travelled on with the Count. She spoke about how nice it looked in the spring, when the May was in flower, and recalled every detail of her last journey, how restless the dog had been, and how the kitten had annoyed her husband by sitting on the back of his neck.

Twilight came quickly, and pitch-darkness found them still on the road. The huge headlights made everything seem mysterious. Claudia became eloquent and even poetic. She said the road at night looked as if it were edged by cathedrals and elms. Felix was quite wide awake now and feeling tired and very bored. They got to a pretentious inn about nine

o'clock, and decided to chance the accommodation and spend the night there.

The first time an illicit couple arrive at an hotel together it is very trying for both of them. The ridiculous discussion at the hotel desk, in indiscreet whispers:

" Shall I put you down under my name? "

" Yes, of course. No! No! "

" Well, just as you like."

" Would it not be better if I put down my own? After all, we are not hiding."

" But if someone looked over the page they would be surprised at seeing our two names."

" Well, put anything! "

So Claudia wrote her name, feeling as she turned away to go to the lift that the eyes of the secretaries, clerks, porters, lift-boys, were all looking at the burning nape of her neck.

The inn they stayed at was one of those sophisticated affairs that call themselves "hostelries." The large musty four-poster, strongly reminiscent of the Limon style of decoration, stood in the middle of the room, while the rest of the furniture, in a wild effort to avoid the usual Maple style, was uncomfortable and extremely ugly. A sham bath-room in an alcove at the back of the bed, containing a tin bath and no water, completed the *ensemble*.

Claudia wondered if she looked as weary and distressed as she felt, and came down to dinner trying hard to look sentimental and interesting. Felix was in better spirits: a large brandy-and-soda had done him good, and he had spent some little time in reckoning how many miles per hour they had averaged that day. By making a few mistakes in adding up figures he had come to a conclusion which was quite satisfactory to the owner of a powerful car. So, as the dinner progressed, he found no difficulty in ex-

pressing those tender feelings which he had so admirably repressed since the morning. He spoke feelingly about many little incidents in his childhood in which he had shown precocious wisdom and remarkable *sang froid*. He grew eloquent when gravely summing up all the times when he and Claudia had met during her first season in 19 . He had first seen her in a box at the Opera, and something had told him even then that she would be the love of his life, his dream-woman, the only woman he would ever love. Bravely did Claudia muster up her *présence d'esprit* and fight an ever-increasing drowsiness. She looked at him brightly, punctuating his phrases by loving adjectives and nouns. She need not have taken so much trouble. He was off, and it would have taken much more than her soft voice to change the current of his thoughts.

The removal of the table and after-dinner what-nots pulled him up and reminded him



that this was an occasion on which action was suitable as well as words. He very tenderly knelt at her feet and kissed the lovely white hands. Truly old-fashioned was the scene acted by the lovers amid their adequate surroundings. Claudia was most certainly overtired and nervous, for she did not receive her lover's embrace with the ardour expected of her; in fact she fell short of the mark. After some time she unfortunately began to wake up and speak at some length about her own childhood and early womanhood. At last, warming to her subject, she began telling him that which she had always promised herself she would tell him under those very circumstances, on their first night together. Her voice husky and tremulous, she told him the ghastly tragedy of her marriage, of that fateful other night when the Count made her his own; how she had suddenly thought, in the surge of revolt becoming to a young girl under

those circumstances, "If only it had been Felix!"

Hiding her head upon his shoulder, overcome by her emotions, her tears ran freely for some little time. When she felt calmer, she looked up into his face, rather awed by his silence. He was asleep. This blow roused her completely. She went upstairs, and after tossing about a little fell into a heavy sleep.

When morning came, Felix was furious to find that he had gone to sleep on the sofa. He was stiff and cold. They gave him a room to wash in. The young lovers met at breakfast in the same charming apartment where they had dined. The sun was shining brightly on everything. It sparkled upon the table and was reflected into their eyes by all the metal instruments which embellished it, until they were fairly blinded. A curtain finally did away with the nuisance and restored the balance of their tempers, but the hasty prepara-

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tions for departure and the discussion over the paying of the bill almost upset this precarious balance.

However, all was finally arranged more or less to their satisfaction, and they set off for the second blissful day of this momentous honeymoon.

The place was really beautiful. There are such places in the world, but I doubt if any one of us can remember more than one that has struck his fancy and remained in the back of his mind as the ideal place which he unconsciously uses as a setting for his most secret plans. Such a place was surprising Pins-les-Iles, where Felix had his roots. He often spoke about it, but mostly as a contrast to Limon — how sunny it was there, and gay; how clear the water running in a wide lake round the island; how vast the sand dunes between them and the sea only a few yards away, yet coming on one as a surprise, for these were

high walls of sand that kept the wind from Pins-les-Iles and shut off all view of the Atlantic Ocean. Their first meal there was delightful. Of course the ghastly bus that held the men and people had not arrived, nor would it, in all probability, till the evening. The post-office at the cross-roads was kept by a dear old lady who curtsied and dusted all the shiny brown chairs with her apron. She was much shocked on hearing of their intention of lunching in the village, although she had heard that one could get a very good meal at the hotel on the sands. "But," said she, "do not expect to see a tall house, for it is a very low one." Felix was amused at the idea of there being an hotel on the sands, although he had heard that a few artists sometimes stayed there in the summer. From the top of the soft, sandy ramparts the green, limitless ocean shone and sparkled, the waves spread and crashed and rolled the slippery shells and stones to and

fro. Awe-inspiring splendour! Comforting continuity! Why couldn't happiness be like that!

In the chimney-pots were planted the sign-posts that one usually sees at gates: "Bella Vista," "Ellegra," "Sweet Cottage," "Carmen." A larger sign arrested their attention: "Savoy Hotel," and, thank Heaven, one of the chimneys in the little red roof was smoking lustily and a good garlicky smell was even then marring the perfect ozone. A small funnel-shaped well at the side of the roof was found to be a sort of rude staircase communicating with what used to be the front door of the building. Down this they climbed, and found a dark, cosy room where a few workmen were sitting at deal tables, drinking red wine and eating a hearty meal.

They joined in the revel and ate hugely. After lunch Claudia lay on the sands and slept, while Felix went to his house to rouse the old

gardener and his wife into making preparations for Claudia's reception. After a few minutes, with fearful willingness and nervous haste, they got one or two of the rooms opened and arranged to his liking. Poor Felix sat down and sent a telegram to his wife, saying: "Urgent business here. Will return Friday," and one to Hortense, "Miss you terribly. Will be back Thursday. All love." Bitterly did he regret the diamond, bitterly did he think of the mortgage!

Claudia was not getting away from her sorrow. The pain was still there — the horror and revolt. She tried to make her mind a blank in the approved ways of M. Coué and M. Vittoz. Sometimes she was partly successful and at other times her failure appeared to make things a hundred times worse. Never once did she think of the Count, who remained alone in the flat in Paris.

After a few restless days the Count made up his mind to write to his wife as if her behaviour were quite natural.

MA CHÉRE AMIE —

I hope you like Pins-les-Iles and that you had a comfortable journey. You forgot to leave me your address, but Rondejambe gave it to me this morning. The boy is well, and so are your dogs. I shall go to Limon in a few days, when all the arrangements are completed about your late brother's affairs. I have been able to avoid having a religious ceremony for him here, and will have one on Monday week at Limon. Perhaps by that time you will have sufficiently recovered to attend. Remember that the only thing we can do for the brave heroes of this terrible war is to offer our prayers for them. Madame Chauveau's son is still missing. She now fears

he must have perished with so many others of his regiment in the great offensive on the Soissons sector.

The gardener is anxious to know about the spring planting and if you still want your sweet-pea seeds to be sent from England. He thinks it is not necessary. It seems the lawn does not look very promising, but I expect he is lazy about watering it. Let me know your plans whenever you have made up your mind what you are going to do.

Your loving husband,

LIMON.

Sitting at breakfast that morning in the verandah, after a long, long night, Claudia was at peace with the world. The lovers' hands met willingly and their glances lingered as they smiled at each other, laughing playfully at everything and nothing. At last here was blissful forgetfulness of all other things. A

few days in this earthly Paradise had worked a miracle. Passion new to Claudia had wiped out every other sort of emotion except a poignant regret that things had not always been thus, and that she had lost three years of her life in which she might have been as blissfully happy as she now was. They were really both like handsome young animals, perfectly mated and thoroughly at ease. Then came the letter. Claudia immediately recognised the handwriting on the envelope, which she hastily tore open. On reading it through, a tempest of anger filled her being. She crumpled it into a ball and threw it far from her. Then she got up and went into the garden. Felix picked up the letter and read it through to find out what had caused his sweet mistress's emotion. He smiled slowly to himself and went in search of her, and found her sitting on the steps of the boathouse, looking straight in front of her.

She behaved as if they had been parted for days, clinging to him rather wildly, with an unsuspected strength. After a while he said: "Here is your letter, darling. I have read it. Good old Limon has taken it very well. Do you think that he imagines that you are here by yourself, resting after all your worries? He must have arranged things rather well in Paris to have the ceremony put off till you can get to Limon. How different this is from our dream of going away for ever! It will be terrible losing you after a short week's bliss! It will make it worse than ever, having known what it is to have you here all to myself in my own home," he went on, unconscious of the storm that was brewing. Claudia could have posed for a statue of Despair. Her arms hung listlessly by her side, her head was sunk on her breast. At last she put her hands to her ears, and said, "Oh, my God, Felix, stop!" and fled. He had the sense not to follow her. At lunch

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she was apparently normal, considerate of his wishes and tenderly womanly. To him this was the most exquisite of their days together.

She seemed to take a greater interest in him and in his stories and reminiscences. In the evening they sat for a long while, hand-in-hand, in the semi-darkness of the terrace. Her mood was beautifully keyed to his. He loved her. She was the ideal woman, the ideal mate. There was nothing she did not understand, and what a hostess she could have been, with her amazing gifts and quick wit! He slept enveloped in a golden dream, quivering with a sense of her beauty and her nearness. He slept late and woke up lazily conscious of his great happiness. He had not heard her call him, as she usually did when she woke up.

While he was dressing, he looked out of the window and thought he saw her standing in her green dress by the water's edge. He gaily anticipated their meeting when he would come

up behind her and take her by surprise. He liked to come up behind her and hold her by her waist. He flushed with pleasure at the thought. But he must have taken a green shadow for her green dress, for when he went out she was not there, nor was she anywhere on the island.

## XV

AT first Claudia had an uneasy feeling that all the people she saw knew about her escapade at Pins-les-Iles. She imagined herself entirely changed by her romantic adventure. So little, however, did she appear different that she resumed all the little mannerisms and shades of indifference towards her husband which the poor man eagerly snatched at as a sign that she had returned for good and was cured of running away. As they found everything beautifully in order when they arrived, it is to be supposed that the relations who attended her brother's funeral at Limon had no idea that she had not been there all the time, arranging for their housing and their comfort. They could not guess that she herself had only driven up the steep hill from the station a few hours before they did.

The funeral, of course, was a ghastly affair. All the relations were staying in the historic part of the castle which was seldom used, as the more habitable part was now almost entirely occupied by the hospital. The relations seemed to be everywhere. Gloomy mounds of crêpe clustering together in bunches, for ever taking each other aside to confide their latest secret. It was very natural that Claudia should have suspected them of talking about her — she did her best to keep them away from her father, who was still partially paralysed, but entirely sound mentally, and who would have died of the shock had he guessed what his daughter had done. The poor man had had a stroke when he heard that his son had entered the Flying Corps. It had sounded to him like the knell of his death, and he had been only too right. It was a ghastly sight, that of this youngish man of forty-four, his face parched and yellow, walking with crutches, supported

by two nurses and sticking out his legs in uncontrolled grotesque attitude, like a puppet pulled by strings.

What a relief it was for Claudia to find herself safely back in Paris. She had escaped without having been asked any questions — not even by Limon himself! She began to think herself quite safe.

One afternoon, some days after her return, she was dispensing tea to the sort of old ladies who assemble in a house of mourning in the hopes of bringing to the bereaved the gossip of which they are deprived by their seclusion.

Claudia felt strangely ill at ease with them; now that she had something to hide, she resented their sharp-tongued chatter about other people's affairs, their prying eyes and ironical intonations, their hard, worldly points of view. She felt chilled and was filled with dread forebodings. One of them she had always disliked since her early childhood: she was a

bridge-playing, race-going, high-bosomed lady of uncertain age — a busybody, continually engaged in making and unmaking marriages; her claim to fame was that she was supposed to have had an affair with two European crowned heads, the same evening, on the same settee. One was the Princely Don Juan of Victoria's reign, the spoilt child of Europe. Claudia's father, when he made much of this lady, had presumably walked in the footsteps of greater men. This gave the dear woman her *entrées* into Claudia's life and her sitting-room. She did or did not know that she was not wanted as that was the last thing she bothered about. The cook was good, the house spacious, and Limon an indifferent bridge-player who played high. This afternoon she was particularly obnoxious. She said what she thought about the poor Prince's health, how sad it was to see him practically paralysed, he who used to be so brilliant, etc. . . . she knew



of a doctor who could have cured him if he had seen him *in time*, but of course now it was too late. If they had only listened to her advice at the beginning.

She leant across to one of her old friends and suddenly, to her intense dismay, the thought flashed through Claudia that they were discussing Felix. She strained her ears to catch what they were saying. Though it was hardly necessary, as, in their excitement, they unconsciously raised their voices.

"Yes, I have just seen Molly. She was summoned post-haste by Felix's mother. Of course, they still hope to patch it up, but little May is very bitter, very obstinate."

Someone said, "You don't mean to tell me that Felix has mis-behaved!"

"Felix? Why, of course. Don't you know? Why, it's all over the town. It's about that woman — that *cocotte* creature. He has mortgaged half his property. Yes,

Pins-les-Iles, of course. What else has he got? ”

“ — He has given her jewels and motor-cars and horses.

“ Of course May is furious; after all, the money’s hers!

“ Molly is very tactful. She’s got them well in hand and swore to the old mother that all will be forgiven within a few days. All Felix has got to do is to promise that he will go away to Pins-les-Iles with his little wife and spend a quiet summer there. Of course he’ll agree. Our Felix has got his head screwed on the right way for all his eccentric behaviour! ”

Claudia breathed a sigh of relief. So that was what they thought. Thank God that they had got it all wrong — quite wrong — incredibly wrong. Then she began to wonder how it was possible that they should have been as incredibly wrong as they were. . . . Were they wrong?

A very troubled sleep did Claudia have that night, and very little rest.

I came to lunch the next day and found her overstrung, nervous and irritable. She had not told me then why she had left Pins-les-Iles, although I knew she had been there. I have often wondered in what way Felix had failed her. She herself had announced brazenly that he was a perfect lover — what else had there been that he had not done? She could not have seriously thought that he meant to keep her with him always. Such a thing was preposterous. Utterly out of the question. She could not have been foolish enough to imagine that they could escape so easily from their obligations. I looked forward to having a talk with her after lunch, as we were going to Callou's to try on some dresses, and things of that sort.

Lunch was a hideous affair. I found that the Count had lost some of his dash. He

walked more heavily and his face, which used to be merely rather highly-coloured, was now almost purple. Aunt Ruth was there. They were very pleasant to each other, the aunt and the nephew, making great efforts to please. Aunt Ruth spoke a lot about the music which she had heard recently and about the music which she was going to have performed in her house in the near future. Count Robert spoke about the people he met at the Trainers' Club — of the game there and about a young man who had been black-balled some time before the war. They said at the Club that he had behaved so well during the war that they were ready to overlook his doubtful parentage if he came up again for election. Aunt Ruth had forgotten the story about his parentage. Yes, of course that was it. His father was all right, but his mother's brother had somehow been mixed up in the Dreyfus affair. No one really knew quite how; some thought that he had

been the lawyer who had looked after Miss Dreyfus' affairs — she was only Dreyfus' sister, of course, but one could not risk anything like that at the Trainers' Club. Anyhow, the committee were willing to waive all this aside, as the young man had behaved with great gallantry on the field of battle and had received the Legion of Honour. Aunt Ruth suddenly remembered that one of her pet musicians was interned in Switzerland because he was not quite French. She gave nephew Robert the details that it might be necessary for the authorities to possess, and begged him to do his best to have the great man sent back to his anxious friends in Paris. Nephew Robert promised to do all he possibly could.

Claudia listened to all this, putting in a word or two. I had nothing to say — my turn would come when I should be alone with Claudia.

She was trying on a lovely black garment

trimmed with knotted fringe — something about her, as I caught her looking in the glass, appeared to me absolutely different from the old Claudia. She seemed more conscious of herself — more poised. I asked her if she had heard from Felix since she got back.

She looked at me out of the corner of her long eyes and answered casually, without interrupting her serious criticisms to Mme. Puss:

“Felix? No. Oh, no, of course not. I haven’t had time. The *back*, Mme. Puss — it’s much too wide — and you can cut it very much lower. Poor Felix, I must ring him up. He’s a funny person. I’m afraid he must have been very disappointed in me. We didn’t get on at all well. Mme. Puss — the *back*! Cut it right down to the waist; there, take the scissors and do it now.

“He’s publicly replaced me by some ghastly creature — he’s the sort of man who has got to have a woman in his life. Of

course May doesn't count. The stupid little thing. If she . . . No, the skirt is *much* too long. There, that's better. And cut it down to the waist, in a point, under the arms. Yes, that's good."

Claudia looked as if she had just come out of a bath of ink, but it was a nice dress. I wondered if the people in England would like it. We were both planning a campaign in London, where my father had been called on business. It was a good excuse for me to get Claudia away. I was sure the change would do her good. I planned also to get her to meet an old friend of our youth, Hugh Thurston, the fascinating young diplomat who had joined the ranks and done so well in Mesopotamia. We did not speak about Felix any more that afternoon.

The next day I left hurriedly for London with my father, as my mother was unable to accompany him. This was only a preliminary



canter, so to speak, as Claudia and I still meant to go there later on, together.

I stayed in London longer than I thought. It was a fortnight before I got back to Paris. One evening towards the end of our stay, my father took me to the Coliseum. We were delighted at the prospect of seeing Grock and partner. They are our favourite clowns. The show was good, and Grock's turn was very much applauded. He was encored many times and came back smiling his lovely crooked smile. In the excitement someone near us spoke quite loudly. What was my surprise when I recognised the small neat head of our friend Felix! There he was, sitting a few yards away. He looked at me — and blushed girlishly. I pointed him out to my father, who smiled. "He's got Bébé with him," he said. "I'll have a word with her in the interval."

It was true. There was the celebrated Hortense Bébé Printemps. I was thrilled. I had



heard so much about the resplendent creature! Here she was in the flesh — rather good flesh, for the matter of that — and how beautifully garbed! A slinky brown dress covered by a marvellous sable wrap. I took in all the details. She had on all the latest jewels from Cartier's, and on the fourth finger of her plump left hand a huge square-cut diamond.

I was mystified by her presence here with Felix — and puzzled by his blush. When my father got up to have a word with Bébé, I asked him to tell Felix to come and see me next morning, as I had a message for him from a friend in Paris. It was cheek, but I was determined to find out about this new development.

Felix came. He was not a bit embarrassed. He was delighted to see me, and as unaffected as a schoolboy. I did not speak about Claudia first. He did. He said: "How is my poor Claudia? How she must have hated that aw-

ful ceremony; she is so morbid sometimes about things like that. She is too sensitive, really, for this rough world. One is always afraid that one is hurting her in some way."

"Yes," I agreed, "but when she gets over them the danger is that she may become hard. How awful it would be if she covered herself with a great ugly crust of hard worldliness, to hide her wounds! "

"Claudia couldn't turn hard — she'll go on hurting herself and being hurt by things, but she'll go on till the end — a little light of hope struggling to the surface through all the bruises. I don't know why she loves me. I'm quite unworthy but I understand all her moods; perhaps she would have been happy with me."

He got up and stood by the mantelpiece. "It was such a temptation having her there at my home — if I could have kept her always! But it was impossible. May — the baby on

the way. I couldn't tell her. I was afraid of a scene. And then, when she left — God, that was awful. I think I went mad then. I got back to Paris — I was in a rage — I could have done anything to hurt her, to forget." Poor Felix. He was a bit of a poet; he really meant what he said at the time he said it.

He told me about his affair with Bébé as if she had been a palliative to his unhappiness, an accident which had happened to him in the distraught condition in which he was when he realised that he had failed to make Claudia happy. Bébé had emerged, the only tangible thing in the turmoil of those miserable days. He had evidently gone back to Paris to drown his sorrow by the old classic way, "wine, women and song." That was *his* version.

My father had, however, a different tale to tell. He was quite willing to blacken *tant soit peu* the reputation of his brilliant young friend Felix. Or perhaps, more charitably, he did

not dislike showing off his intimate knowledge of Bébé's little ways and her inobscure life. He gave me the information which I have used in the chapter preceding the one of the elopement.

I went back to Paris hoping that Claudia would never get to know about Bébé.

## XVI

CLAUDIA's relations towards her husband seemed not to have suffered from her escapade with Felix. Robert was so relieved to get her back that he had no word of blame for her thoughtless conduct. But alas! for his security there was a heavy storm brewing which very nearly set at naught his carefully-nurtured marital bliss!

In France a girl entirely loses her individuality the day she marries. She has got no status separate from that of her husband's wife — she can't sign a business paper or a lease — in many cases where she has not got a separate allowance she may not even sign a cheque.

Claudia's fortune was entirely in the hands

of her husband, although he was not supposed to be able to touch the capital.

The bulk of Claudia's fortune was in America, but about a third had been invested by her husband, shortly after their marriage, in different securities, though she had not at the time troubled to ascertain what they were.

Claudia took it into her head that she wanted to buy a necklace of black pearls. She thought it would look uncommon with her black clothes. More interesting than the white pearls which every woman wore to "brighten up" their mourning. Instead of asking the Count what was the best way of going about it, she set forth by herself to interview their nasty *homme d'affaires*, M. Bénét. It is the custom for people belonging to the old aristocracy to do nothing for themselves; they always trust their affairs implicitly to a person who, as in this case, is not even a lawyer, and who arranges their estate to his own advantage.

She was shown into M. Bénét's dusty old office and asked to wait a few moments. He presently came in: a tall man with a pronounced stoop. He had a high, receding forehead which made a straight line to the end of his long nose. He had almost no chin. This absence of chin was accentuated by a huge, unkempt red moustache. He treated Claudia as if she were a very important half-wit. Whenever she said anything, he smiled indulgently before answering, and then invariably answered the question a little bit wrongly, as if he had not quite understood what she meant. To-day, when she arrived he was in a very good mood, and extremely patient with her. She wanted to find out if it were possible to sell a few of the shares which were over in France in order to buy the pearls she coveted. For a long time she could not get him to answer her simple question. She finally asked to see a list of her securities.

He rang the bell and summoned his assistant. They held a little consultation together; then the assistant left. M. Bénet made himself very agreeable, enquiring after the health of the Count and young Count Robert. He said he often had the pleasure of seeing the Count in his office; he consulted him very often about his affairs. Any little help he could give the Countess would always be very willingly put at her disposal. She really came all too rarely to see him. Ladies disliked coming to dingy offices, but it was sometimes a useful thing to do — especially if, like the Countess, a lady had a handsome fortune of her own.

At last the slimy young clerk came back and handed a document to his chief. This he gravely perused before handing to Claudia. She glanced through it. "But," she stammered, "surely — Why, these are — Is this all?"



"Madame the Countess," began M. Bénét, "you signed the document yourself; you gave your consent. Of course now, during the war, is not the time to sell stock."

But Claudia had been reading the documents through again.

"Russian Government Loan.

"Russian Railways.

"Electric Power of Athens.

"Turkish Government Loan.

"Siberian Mines."

Then a transfer to Count de Limon of a few U.S. steel shares, in exchange for French railways and a transfer to Maître Bénét of some American Oil shares in exchange for shares in a Belgian Company.

"It's all worthless," said Claudia. Maître Bénét lifted his arms to heaven. "Madame the Countess, pray do not say such a thing. When I had the pleasure and privilege of advising the Count about these little investments,

I acted to the best of my knowledge. No doubt some of these securities have depreciated in value for the moment, of course — just for the moment. But madame has still got her American shares — no doubt I could easily arrange a transfer of these shares and settle any little debts which may have been accumulating. They so easily accumulate, these little debts.”

Claudia was white and very angry. The poor man acted upon her overwrought nerves like the noise of a saw cutting through stone upon a person with a toothache.

“Have you got in your possession in this office my husband’s bonds in French State railways?”

“No, as a matter of fact. . . .”

Claudia looked at him. He faltered. “Yes, yes; such a little item. I had forgotten, of course.” He touched the bell. “Gustave,” he said, “fetch Dossier No. B., le Comte de

Limon.” Then he grew very red, perspiring freely. His hands, fingering the papers on his desk, trembled visibly. Claudia never said a word.

At last the fearful Gustave came back. Claudia snatched the papers from him. M. Bénet was just too late — it was rather undignified. Claudia looked through the papers, opened out on her knees. She easily found the bonds, beautifully printed in blue and buff. There was a slip of paper attached to them, on which was printed in neat calligraphy, “To be paid in quarterly dividends to

Mlle. Hortense Gavard,

4 Rue du Bouquet de Longchamps,  
16<sup>me</sup>.”

She shut the dossier, and handed it to M. Bénet, saying simply, “Thank you. That is all, I think, for to-day,” as if she were leaving a shop.

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She had certainly known for a long while that her poor father made a mistake when he imagined that Count Robert was a landowner. He possessed a few valuable pictures and tapestries, but Limon had long ago been mortgaged to the hilt, so that as a matter of fact he possessed no regular income, except what he got from selling his timber.

When she came back to the house she did not tell the Count what she had found out. M. Bénét himself told his noble client what had happened when he summoned him in haste by telephone that very afternoon.

Claudia's anger had quite died down by the next day, when she and the Count met at luncheon. After all, she expected very little from the Count and had long ago, at Limon, suspected his attachment to Hortense Bébé Printemps, as long ago as the days when that fairy had played an active part in the nursery.

Although Claudia was not really upset about

the Count's relations with Hortense, from that day at the lawyer's dated her greater independence. She put an absolute stop to all pretence at intimacy with him. In public as well as in private she treated him like a stranger. She no longer consulted him about their social engagements and she frankly made arrangements about the coming spring and summer without taking him into consideration.

As Limon was now a State hospital and run by the military authorities, Claudia and I were free to do what work we could at the large hospitals installed in our quarter. We went to the Astoria in the morning. Our afternoons were free, so we attended all the charity affairs given at private houses or in rooms hired for the occasion. Someone had thought that it would be a good idea to give a big affair in the old Palais Royal in aid of the Red Cross.

There were to be booths all round made in replica of the old shops under the arcade. Most of the stall-holders were chosen amongst the younger French set and some amongst the more representative foreigners who abounded in Paris just then. Claudia and I were asked to do our bit. We decided to have a booth for "frivolities" — shawls, bouquets, cushions, quilts — reminiscent of the Directoire style. Claudia took quite an interest in this and we had great fun arranging for the fête. All the salesladies were to be in costume — we were to be dressed alike and chose our costumes with great care. Count Robert took a certain amount of interest in us — he was always anxious for his wife to appear at her best if she were going to attend a public function. Claudia was looking well that year and was rapidly becoming known as a beauty. I don't know how these things begin, but I imagine that her connection with Felix, which was

quite well known, must have stamped her as a beauty. He was supposed to possess an unerring judgment where women or horses were concerned. For many years he had set the fashion in women. Of course they had often been seen together when they used to go careering about the roads. So Claudia, who was really looking no prettier than usual, only perhaps more animated, created quite a stir when she took her place in our booth. We had quite a rush at first, and were kept busy serving our customers. One of them, the very same old lady of the tea-party, whispered in my ear, as I was handing her parcel to her, "Rather unfortunate, isn't it?" I did not reply, as I didn't know what she meant, but she repeated her remark, glancing aside in a knowing way. I looked round, and saw that Felix's wife had come into the stall next to ours, which was a flower-stall, and was doing a brisk trade there.

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Claudia came up to me just then, and noticing that I was staring at someone, saw instantly who it was. She stared also: luckily the object of our interest did not see us, as she was busy handling her posies. Claudia, for once, was at a loss.

"Darling," she said, "what should I do? I don't quite know."

"Do?" I said. "Nothing at all. When the show is over we'll go over and speak to her — quite time enough. Please attend to your customers."

She went meekly back. But this was not the end of my tribulations. Towards evening, when there were fewer people, Felix came dutifully to depose his modest offering into his wife's small hand; he had a friend with him, the notorious St. Cyr. Felix had evidently no idea that we were anywhere near. He appeared very *empresé* and gallant — bending over his little wife's hand in quite an



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affecting way. They chatted together gaily, and he finally blew her a kiss as he and his friend moved away. St. Cyr knew perfectly well that we were within a few yards. He seemed much amused.

"Oho, my gallant friend," said he, "what a display of marital attachment, and in front of so many charming ladies! For whose benefit is it intended? The beautiful Claudia, perhaps?" He got no further, shocked by the expression on his friend's face. Felix pulled himself together quickly and was soon bowing over our hands, and kissing them as he had kissed his wife's. He spoke exclusively to me. Poor Claudia tried to answer St. Cyr's inane questions while straining her ears so as not to lose a word of what we were saying.

"Well, little Judith, versatile as usual! I leave you surrounded by the *jeunesse dorée* of London, and find you in the thick of it in Paris."

“We are both a bit versatile,” I severely answered. “But whereas I am merely sketchy you are profoundly convincing”; and I glanced at May, who was busily shutting shop and pretending not to see what was happening.

“Ah! that is my serious side; one’s got at least two sides, even if one is a mere male.”

“What we call a *cœur d’artichaut*, perhaps?”

“Now, Judith, don’t bite. I’m a reformed character. I’m leading the life of a hermit.”

“With Bébé — ”

He leant towards me so close that I could detect a smell of cold cigar.

“No, no, I assure you — please don’t think so badly of me. Judith, really, how can you — you who know?” He raised his voice a little.

“And what do you both know so well?” said Claudia, at last chiming in, her voice rather harsher than usual.

“Oh, nothing, dear Countess; we have a secret, little Judith and I — if one may be permitted to have secrets even from you.” He sounded hateful, and she hated him.

When he left, Claudia was almost in tears.

“And may I ask what the celebrated secret is, darling? And what has Béb   to do with it? You never even said you had seen him in London.”

“Darling, darling, it’s nothing. I met him when he was with Béb  .”

“Béb  ! He was with Béb   Printemps? You *saw* him?”

“Yes, darling; but it’s nothing — he was just saying that it was all over now. Don’t snap so — people do things — you must see —”

“Oh, I *see*, I *see*! It’s quite clear. And that’s what she meant — the old bitch. She was *incredibly* right.” And she turned away from me as if I were an unclean toad.

I went over to have a word with May. I found her looking unwell, almost haggard. It rather suited her bird-like charm. Claudia joined us and talked quite naturally about the fair. They arranged to go out together to visit a hospital the next Sunday, as May was interested in it and wanted to raise more funds.

That evening, when she came home, Claudia had a terrible scene with her husband. She accused him suddenly out of an absolutely clear sky with having cheated her out of her fortune to give it to his mistress. She lashed him pitilessly with her tongue — she could be very bitter at times. The poor Count really was absolutely at a loss. Claudia was in a tearing passion. She did not own to herself or realise that she was really in a passion against Felix. She accused the Count of living on her, of using her for getting more money for his women. She was awful. Her face was distorted with anger. The poor man was

terrified — really frightened out of his wits; he had never imagined his sleepy-eyed wife capable of such extravagant demonstrations of hostility. He tried to soothe her, he tried to take her hand — she shook him off. Finally she left the room, banging the door behind her as hard as she possibly could; then she rushed upstairs to her room and threw herself on her bed, weeping like an hysterical schoolgirl. She was terribly ashamed of herself the next day, although she told me about it as if it had been a good joke which she had tried on just to see if she could scare “the poor Robert.” I felt really sorry for the miserable man — it was unfair that he should be so harshly attacked just when he had begun to think himself quite safe. He sent Claudia a marvellous assortment of orchids, with a little note enquiring about her health and regretting that he was obliged to spend the day at Limon, as he had made an appointment there with his

architect. Claudia laughed. "He's so scared now, he daren't even stay in the house."

I hated leaving her, but was obliged to go to London, where she promised to join me in a few weeks.

XVII

CLAUDIA was rather surprised when Molly announced her intention of coming to see her and the son and heir. She said she could not possibly be at home that afternoon, but that she would call on Molly at her hotel. She felt that she wanted all the advantages on her side; the greatest of these, in the state her nerves were in, was being able to leave when she chose.

Molly was still strikingly handsome — a big, powerfully-built woman, refined by her grey hair and her subdued colouring. She had bulging magnetic eyes of a deep brown like shining chestnuts. Her complexion was bad — her skin coarsened by too much make-up. But she was clever in her lighting effects and her choice in hats. She gave one the impres-

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sion of possessing a vitality that nothing could abate.

She had not seen Claudia alone for a long time. She now came to her with a beautiful, spontaneous gesture, her two hands held out. Claudia felt strangely young and *gauche*.

"Claudia, Claudia, my child, but it is good to see you." Thus she greeted her.

Molly still assumed the rôle of second mother to her whenever they met, and appeared to think that she had the right to ask indiscreet questions. She pretended to think that Claudia and Robert adored each other and were perfectly suited to each other. "Just like my little May and her dear husband," she said. "It is really touching to see how fond those two are of each other. I do not believe that any other living soul but myself knows about their wonderful intimacy of thought as well as life. They are very shy, especially my little girl; she takes as much



trouble to hide her happiness as others take to flaunt it. And, of course, now that they have got the 'great event' to look forward to, they are more than ever united. There is nothing like a baby to make people really understand each other with perfect understanding.

"And you, my naughty little Claudia, you have never even let me have a look at your precious little Robert. Naughty, naughty! I shall take to haunting your house until I get a sight of the precious mite."

Claudia did her best to stem the talk that flowed over her like Niagara over the Falls. Her slight efforts had no effect whatsoever. Molly had prepared all she was going to say, and say it she would.

She ordered tea and handed some to her guest, never stopping the flow of her talk.

She said some things that seemed, on reflection, to be contradictory. For instance, she actually touched lightly on the ridiculous

*potin* about Felix and some "dancing woman, actress, or something," saying how sensible May had been about it all. She knew that in Paris it was the custom for married men to go about with their bachelor friends' acquaintances — that it really meant nothing at all.

But later she seemed to forget that May was sensible. She said, looking at Claudia suddenly very searchingly, "May is so sensitive. I sometimes think — I am afraid she is a little like one of my sisters."

"You mean — *Not* — *Not* like Fay — ?"

"Oh, no — not, of course, not like poor Fay. I meant she is sometimes sensitive about little things that have no importance. I think she makes pictures in her mind and sometimes she can't bear the image she herself has made up. She sleeps badly. Fay slept badly. I remember so many things now that I never used to think about — What a morbid old thing I'm becoming. It's because I've got

so much time with nothing to do, I *brood* — but, come now. I must speak of brighter things to this bright little Pretty. How nice you look, darling. I love that dark, greasy look you give to your hair — but didn't it curl prettily off your forehead? Don't hide too much of yourself." And so she went on. It seemed hours before Claudia could get away, although the ordeal had lasted only about forty-eight minutes. When she left, Claudia felt as if she had been to confession — in the old schoolroom days, when she used to dread it so. She felt as if she had been cooped up in a stuffy confessional, with a priest who was punishing her by telling her all her secret thoughts.

She walked back from the hotel, just to feel her feet on the pavement and prove to herself how independent she was. She took big breaths of air when she got to the Champs Elysées and she stopped and looked in at all the

shop-windows, deliberately missing several appointments.

For the next few days she did nothing about seeing Molly again, then she suddenly made up her mind to ask her to come and see her and the child.

Molly came to lunch. She was charming to old Robert, delightfully babyish with young Robert, who was brought in at dessert — motherly and appreciative with Claudia. The lunch was a great success. Unfortunately, Count Robert had to leave almost at once after his son and heir was taken upstairs for his midday sleep as there was an election at the Trainers' Club that he was absolutely obliged to attend, so the two women were left together.

As she looked over at Molly, Claudia suddenly felt that her hatred of her was a thing of the past — it no longer existed. Claudia, if asked about it, just then, would have said quite sincerely that she had never hated her. It

was something quite simple that Molly had said about John — it was sincere — it went home. Also Claudia now felt sorry for Molly. She suddenly said, “Molly, was your poor sister Fay at all like May physically?”

“Like May? — like my little May? Not to look at — oh, no, not a bit like her — but, perhaps, otherwise — Claudia darling, I am often worried about the child. She looks so ill. There is something wrong — she worries. There is no reason she should tell *me* things. I left her alone for years with her aunt. She acts to me as she acts to the public, but I feel there is something wrong. I often blame myself. I have been so selfish, so arrogant, trying to plan my life. I have often done things that were wrong. I did wrong by you, long ago, about Felix. I wanted to please your father. It wasn't true, what I said — but I really thought Felix wasn't good enough for you.”

“Molly, please, don’t go on.” — Claudia felt like a criminal whose crime has found him out after he had thought himself quite safe. (This *must* be stopped). “Molly, I really never minded. It’s so long ago. Is there nothing one can do for May? She does look ill.”

But Molly of a sudden had become remote; like a person who discovers that she is receiving her friend in her petticoat, she suddenly covered herself defensively.

“May is really as right as rain — mothers have odd fancies sometimes. I’ve got so much time now in which to think — too much time. I wonder sometimes if I have over-developed my naturally strong will. I am haunted by the idea that I should have done better not to *do* things, not to accomplish anything, not to have desires. Blessed are those who drift!”

Claudia felt a great pity surge over her — she seemed to understand exactly what Molly meant. They parted, after a long time, the

best, the closest of friends. Yet, underlying the friendliness, Claudia felt a sort of resentment slowly growing up within her. She began to feel that Molly had been unburdening some of her burdens unbidden on to an absolutely innocent witness. She felt somehow as if she were being coerced into taking a view that was not really her own. She began to understand why people who are not American *resent* Americans — they certainly have a way of exposing their wounds, of flaunting their innermost secret blemishes before anyone whom they wish to propitiate, and of taking it for granted that the person to whom they speak not only suffers from the same ailments but fully sympathises with all their symptoms. Claudia became convinced, after a little reflection, that all Molly had said had been in order to make a certain impression upon her mind. She shirked the knowledge that the impression would be *indelible*.



But that night, when Claudia went to bed, all Molly had done and said was completely forgotten. Felix had telephoned about six o'clock, asking her to meet him in the Bois. She went out, all of a flutter. They had had a short walk before dinner, in the dusky cool Avenue des Acacias. The old Felix seemed to have come back — *he* had no reproaches for Claudia's defection at Pins-les-Iles — *she* did not speak about Bébé. He wanted a friend — a sympathiser — a woman — an admirer. Claudia was all that; she was once more acquiescent. Something about him — the feel of the cloth of his coat — the smell of his tobacco — the look in his eyes — his rather large lips — everything seemed to call to her, to be part of herself. He made her promise to come to see him the next day at the Palais Royal, early before lunch, at eleven o'clock. The rest of the evening had been vague. The Count had taken her to a big charity concert given



for the British Red Cross. Claudia sat in her uncomfortable seat, only dimly aware of what she was hearing. She had to be polite to several people whom they had asked to join them in their box. Aunt Ruth made some very good remarks about the music, the musicians and the rendering of the pieces. Of course there were a few bits done by amateurs — the British do so love amateurs. There were some children, five of them, who did a bacchanal of Spring; some were very fat, some had thin, bony, protuberant knees; all danced out of time; the little star had a fixed smile on her face and a pronounced cast in her eye. She fascinated Claudia by her unknowingly lewd gestures and the sordid ugliness of her quick, sharp movements.

Robert was being so polite to Aunt Ruth — so good-natured in his ignorance of all things musical, so tolerant of Claudia's vagueness — such a man of the world! She actively dis-

liked him that evening as much as she had disliked him that time she had made the scene about Hortense Bébé Printemps. She found that since that scene — since she had allowed herself to dislike him — she disliked him much more often than she used to — it now gave her a definite satisfaction to feel how much she disliked him.

At last the show was over — there was the usual waiting about in the draughty doorway for one's carriage. Facing the entrance, Claudia saw Felix's small footman waiting for him to come out to call his carriage. She had not known he was at the concert. Her heart missed a beat — she hoped she would see him, but for once Robert had seen the car quickly and she was whirled off. She wondered if it was May's silver cloak she had seen just as they were leaving.

She slept peacefully that night and had no dreams.

## XVIII

THE next morning there was no question of going to the Palais Royal. Felix sent a hectic note to Claudia telling her that he had at last got his desire and was leaving immediately for the Amiens sector, where he was going to join General G.'s corps. He could not give her any details.

Claudia was disappointed. It was disconcerting to be thus thwarted when she had made such good resolutions; she had meant to be so kind, to make him so happy; she would have been such a loving mistress!

Felix had just time to spend a few hours with Bébé. It is a good thing that Claudia did not follow her impulse and go to the Palais Royal for her morning stroll, or she might have seen the charming lady descending from her taxi-

cab at the very door of Felix's flat. Bébé behaved beautifully and was quite tearful when Felix really tore himself away to make his adieux at his official residence.

Poor little May was very plucky. She did not say much — she and the old Countess were already at lunch when he came in. He was rather *gêné* — not quite at his ease. He said he didn't expect to eat such excellent *pommes soufflées* for the next few weeks. He cursed his valet, quietly, for not having brought the bottle of Ponte Cannel which he had ordered to the desired temperature. He even playfully teased his little wife on her emaciated appearance, hoping that she would appear stouter when they next met. "Oh, yes, I shall be like a tower by that time!" His mother, as usual, did not say much. After lunch she took him aside and gave him a medal of the Sacred Heart which had been especially blessed by the Bishop of Meaux. At the very end,

when he was really leaving in a real flurry of excitement, the telephone-bell was heard and his valet came and whispered something in his ear; but he said, "Say I've left — I really can't. . . . Good-bye, May. *Au revoir, Ma-man chérie*. Take care of each other."

May stood looking at nothing long after the courtyard was deserted. Then she turned back into the house. Eight little purple scars in the palms of her hands showed where the pointed nails had dug into the white flesh as she clenched her hands to keep her dignified mythical aloofness intact.

## XIX

FELIX woke up with a start to find that the night was still at its blackest. No glimmer of light showed through the half-open door of the kitchen, where he lay wrapped up in his thick coat. It was a very good coat which had an extra lining of sheepskin that buttoned on to the other. His mother-in-law had sent it to him. All Molly's gifts were always well thought out and practical. This one was the very best, lightest, and most sensible garment which she could have chosen. Felix wondered if it were time for him to get up; he looked along the row of sick men and wounded which were lined up along that wall and then along three other walls. He noticed idly that the head of one was pillowed on the shoulder of his neighbour. He thought, "Good fel-

low, that." Then he remembered that both men had died some time that night. He was now sufficiently awake to look at his wrist-watch. Four o'clock. It was time to be moving; and he went over to his comrade, and whispered in his ear. The other nodded. It had been very carefully arranged beforehand. There would be a long walk through the snow which would take almost an hour to Pas en Artois, where a friend would pick him up and give him a lift in a cart to Doullens, where Claudia, live and hearty, awaited him. He felt stiff and sore; his last drop of brandy was gone. That man over there had had it after they had removed his leg yesterday. That was the man who had been strapped on to the old kitchen table, his leg one mass of blood and filth, the silent men tinkering at him, and he as silent as they, biting at a cork stuffed between his teeth. He would probably pull through; by now they had got him to the

clearing-station at Doullens; then he'd go on to one of the big city hospitals — he'd live without a leg, stumping about all his life.

The snow was stiff and the air dry. Felix's feet were sore — especially at the heels. One heel was much inflamed and swollen and gave him great discomfort. He did not like the idea of leaving his post even for a few hours, but he had arranged it all so carefully, had looked forward to it for days, and Claudia was expecting him. He began to think about her, but could not concentrate his thoughts. He could not even see her face as he usually could when he tried. He saw Bébé's face quite clearly, and his mother's. Then he stopped thinking and trudged along conscious only of his discomfort.

His feet hurt more and more; he thought of the advertisement of "Dr. Soles' foot comfort." A drawing of a foot with large knobs on it and arrows indicating "This is where it



hurts." Off and on he remembered his old thoughts of Claudia. How romantic their attachment was — after all those years. Like Pelléas and Mélisande, or some sort of opera. The landscape was hideous, like a huge field ploughed by an angry giant. All holes and ruts, with a few bare trees that might have been untidy brethren to the mutilated telegraph posts. At last he got to a dilapidated farmhouse, and found his friend there with the lorry. Without a word he crawled under the tarpaulin and stretched himself out on the floor. They moved slowly on. The floor was incredibly sticky. He felt about and discovered that it was full of resin! It must have been used to carry pine logs about. He was terribly upset — almost tearful. His lovely coat! It was too annoying. He felt sleepy but now that he was lying down his feet seemed to get worse instead of better, and they began to swell until he thought they would

burst his heavy boots. He took the boots off and then realised that his socks were getting covered with the sticky stuff. It was unbearable! His anger seethed up like a burning wave, but as quickly subsided as he fell into a deep sleep.

Claudia was glad to get up past those awful men to her little room. She locked and bolted the door and then began to untwist the long red satin belt that the Zouave had given her at dinner. It looked nice on the floor, like a huge piece of stuff at the dressmaker's when she tries to tempt one to order a thing one does not require. Then the singing began. "Tipperary" — it came from that little room Claudia had passed on the stairs. The door had been ajar and the English officers had stared so as Claudia passed them on her way up! They made awful remarks to each other about her, and all French women. Now they

were singing as if the town belonged to them. Claudia could not sleep. The day had been too exciting. She did not have the proper papers; her wits alone had taken her to the place she so wanted to go to. At Amiens the people at the station had been quite nice, but at Doullens she had had a narrow escape. She had taken off her hat in the train so as to look more like the women about there, who were mostly peasant women. The man in her compartment, an army doctor, had given her a letter to the clearing-station at Doullens, and she had an old envelope from the War Office on which she put the name of the general who was then at Doullens. But it was nasty getting through the little barrier at Doullens station. The woman who went through before had an argument with the soldier on guard, so Claudia, holding her ticket in her mouth and all her parcels in her hands, mumbled that she'd be over the way in the café if she were wanted,

and walked bravely through them and across the square to the café. There she did not linger but went right through into the street on the other side. She asked a boy the way to the curé's; he asked which one, as there were several; she said the oldest. So he took her to the presbytery. There she laid her parcels down, blew on her fingers and rang the bell. The old Curé was much surprised and delighted to think that people in Paris had thought of him. Claudia had quickly invented a thing called Friends of the Stricken Clergy and purported to be sent to enquire if he had received any funds, the while handing him a big mauve note as a beginning. He was so pleased! He took her to the authorities and arranged about her staying the night in Doullens; and here she was ensconced for the night. The singers had stopped; she tried to think of how pleased she was to see Felix, but her mind wandered and she fell asleep.

A few minutes afterwards, or so it seemed, she awoke to the noise of someone banging on her door. She started up in a fright and asked who it was. It was Felix. She tried to open the door, but could not push the bolt; she pulled and pulled but nothing happened. He told her what to do — she did it, but nothing happened. He got rather angry. She felt weak and numb; she knew that she could never push that bolt, however much she tried. Finally Felix went downstairs. The proprietor's brother-in-law was a blacksmith. Together they sawed the bolt across through the crack in the door. While they were doing this Claudia dressed hurriedly. At last the door flew open and Felix came in. He took his beloved in his arms. He had forgotten about the resin, she did not mind. She tried to be gay, to be happy, to laugh, but felt her face all stiff, and did not know what to say.

It was time for him to leave. She had been

sullen, ungracious, and had tried to make up for it by being falsely passionate. They parted with relief, making up quick perfunctory phrases about their next meeting, their loneliness and their love.

## XX

THIS is the wire I received. "My poor Robert has had a stroke one side is quite paralysed am so glad to be back all love Claudia."

She settled down quickly to her new duties and was a very devoted nurse. The first few weeks were very difficult. It was almost impossible to get poor Robert to take any interest in anything but his own illness. This was very bad for him, as he was always trying to move his paralysed side — imagining he was better, and then breaking down when he found that his condition was unchanged. The only thing that interested him at all was the condition of Claudia's father, who had made a rather remarkable recovery and was now able to take a few steps with the aid of his sticks. Robert continually referred to his own age —

he was a few years younger than the Prince, pointing out that it was only reasonable to expect that he should get over his illness more quickly than the Prince. But day after day brought no improvement. Every doctor was summoned, every quack. Mr. Corset himself came down and gave some good advice about installing some electric apparatus that would move the poor man's limbs. This was rather a success. The patient, when using the machine, gave the impression of a person who was rowing, walking or bicycling. He was very proud of these fictitious accomplishments. He often asked for Claudia or Brownie to come and see him on some pretext or other, and would go on with his exercises, securely tied on to the machine, and say, "I have just bicycled five miles. I'll have a little rest now." Claudia used to push his chair out on to the terrace in the afternoon and sometimes she would take him quite a long way in the park.



His friends got on his nerves. They were very tactless. Their amusements made him feel so out of everything that he used to like, and they used to puff their cigars into his face and sip their brandy in a very aggressive, thoughtless way. After Claudia had been with him practically unaided, except by Brownie, for two months, Molly offered to come and help.

Claudia was delighted; she looked forward to having someone to talk to, to confide in, and Robert, who had refused to see all his women friends, was really pleased at the idea of Molly coming to see them. He became quite enthusiastic about her and even asked what room she was going to have and suggested a few improvements.

At last Molly arrived. She was self-possessed, cheerful, effective — a great comfort to Robert, whom she beautifully encouraged in the idea that he was getting better every

day; tenderly maternal with Claudia, whom she obliged to rest in the afternoon. She even found time to play with spoilt young Robert in the evening before he had his supper. Molly again adopted the attitude that Pins-les-Iles was the abode of perfect love. That there was ideal happiness. The only thing she was a bit worried about was May's sleeplessness. She was obliged to take sleeping-draughts every night if she was to get any sleep at all. Otherwise she was well, although she was not allowed to put a foot to the ground. Felix's devotion was touching and unusual in so young a man. Unfortunately he could get away so little now that he was really being a soldier. How proud and happy he would be when the event was safely over. There was still a month before that happened, but Molly would leave in a fortnight, to be on the safe side, in case anything happened.

Molly brought some new books with her

that Claudia had not read. They went for long walks together, exchanging ideas about all things. Molly was very young in many ways, and so marvellously adaptable that she instinctively always chose a subject of conversation that suited her hearer. She could be very tender at times. Often in the evening when they were both talking by the fire in Claudia's bedroom, they would exchange confidences like two girls in their teens. She also made Claudia take an interest in her baby and discussed with her plans for his welfare.

Where was the wicked, painted Jezebel who had wrecked her life? Claudia felt confused when she thought about the past. Brownie, who was perhaps just a little bit jealous of Molly's influence, jestingly reminded her about her dislike and distrust of Molly in the past. Claudia was quite indignant about it, because she could neither refute these taunts nor accept them as facts.

There came a day when Claudia had at last been able to push Robert's heavy bathchair up the hill and into the courtyard. She came laughing and panting into the library. "Did you see your telegram, dear?" said Brownie. "No!" Claudia went into the hall.

"My poor little wife died at three o'clock giving birth to twin girls please break news Molly and get her come at once yours in great distress Felix."

Claudia's heart seemed to stop. She could not think, her cold hands clutched the little bit of blue paper. She must tell Molly. Poor Molly — poor, poor Felix — poor May!

Claudia went upstairs slowly, slowly, her feet dragging; in her hand was the telegram. She got to Molly's door and opened it without knocking. Molly was on her bed. She sat up. "*Claudia!* What is it? *Who?* Tell me. Robert? No, no, it's May — May — my May! Speak, child, speak!" But

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Claudia couldn't say a word. She gave her the telegram; she tried to put her arms round her. Molly pushed her away. "Go, go!" she said.

An hour later, Claudia came back. Molly was crying — her face and eyes terribly disfigured. She was trying to pack without her maid; she would not see her maid. Claudia helped her. Together they got a few things into a bag. Claudia looked out the train and ordered the car. She took her to the station. They had ten minutes to wait in the stuffy waiting-room. At last Molly spoke. "Dear," she said, "it is all my fault. I am punished. God is punishing me. I killed my sister, and He has taken my child. We are quits. I always knew it would happen. Now it has come — and I'm alone — left. If the children live, I'll take care — I'll love those children — May's children — if they live. But they won't."

The train came in. Claudia saw she had her

things and was as comfortable as possible; then she walked back to Limon, trudging through the muddy country roads, quite oblivious to fatigue or the biting cold wind.

When she got back, her dear old Brownie met her in the hall and petted and comforted her as best she could. But Claudia had a horrid guilty feeling which she could not shake off, and also a feeling of envy! May had done the right thing. She would always be right, but Claudia, whatever happened now, would always be wrong. She felt bitter and weak.

Claudia kept the promise she had made to herself to take every care of Robert, to be with him always, so he gradually became entirely dependent upon her; and he had never spent a night away from Limon since her arrival there more than three months ago. A few weeks after May's death, Claudia met Felix by appointment in Paris. He was leaving in a few

days for the front. It was a hectic, tearful meeting. They told each other many times that they would live entirely the one for the other whenever the war was at an end. That they were only waiting for that to complete their destinies; nothing could ever come between them now. Claudia courageously told Felix that she had made a vow not to see him again till the war was finished; she said that she felt that she could not — there was too much unhappiness round them. Robert, her father, her poor brother, May. She felt shattered; she could not be happy now. They would be happy later, when all this murdering was over. At last he agreed, and they took a tender farewell. He did not spare her the bit about probably not coming back at all — he was being sent to a place right in the thick of things, at Soissons.

At last it was over, and Claudia back in the car on her way to Limon.

She settled down again and kept her promise. She did not see Felix again until after the Armistice. More than two years since she last saw him. Here are some extracts from their letters.

FELIX TO CLAUDIA

Claudia, my darling, I cannot imagine how I shall ever be able to live so long without seeing you again. The war will never end. We are continually told that it cannot last much longer, but by now we all see that Germany is not even hungry, much less famished. So it may all last indefinitely, and how shall I bear it? If it were not that I think of our wonderful future together I should indeed be in despair. But, darling, think of all we have got to look forward to. Warm nights on the sea, pacing the deck of a steamer — cold nights by the fireside, reading and talking. And you, wonderful you, always there near me — at


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hand, understanding, loving, gentle. Darling, it will happen, won't it? It *must*.

## CLAUDIA TO FELIX

I feel so happy deep inside my heart that I blame myself for it and feel wicked. This afternoon even the weight of poor Robert's chair seemed light. The sun sparkled on everything after the rain; the scent of the grass was overpowering. I *knew* you were thinking of me and loving me, darling. Surely we must be right, we *must* have a right to be happy. Robert was happy when he was young — he was gay and loved the fair ladies. Now it is my turn. Is that too selfish? No; tell me that we are right — that this great love of ours is like a cleansing flame and not like a consuming fire. I blame myself for having wasted so many days when I might have seen you in Paris before you joined. What a wasteful, wicked fool I was. I will

now be so greedy of our happiness that I shall become an awful old encumbrance. I should die of jealousy if you looked at another woman. I can hardly believe that you were ever that frivolous *noceur* (is that too harsh a word?) that you must have been. How all these tragic happenings have changed you, darling. Yet, I also loved the careless, pleasure-loving boy.

## FELIX TO CLAUDIA

This last leave was awful, Claudia; you really should have come to Paris. That stupid promise you made was just meaningless. I saw some of my old friends and was bored stiff with them. The women were ugly and the men were tight. If this is the sort of thing that we'll get after the war it's really pitiful. The plays were rotten too, and the music all that loud banging jazz that I hate. But if you had only come up, it would all have been

## CATS IN THE ISLE OF MAN

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different. Do try and come next time. Really, darling, I think it's most unkind of you staying away when we might be together. Remember, things happen in wartime — many of our friends have not come back.

### CLAUDIA TO FELIX

I heard from Ruth yesterday, and she says that someone saw you at Maxim's with that woman Bébé again, when you were on leave last week. Darling, I know that there is nothing in it and trust you implicitly, but it does look so bad. And don't you think dear Molly will feel that you shouldn't be seen about so soon after the tragedy? Please don't mind my saying this. I am the only person who can really tell you what people are saying about you, and I know you'll understand. About my promise. I just *must* keep it. If I came up to see you before the end of the war I should just stay away and never come back

— and it would be much worse. I would have to wait in Paris, hidden away in some obscure flat, living only for your return, whereas when we really leave, it will be together for another country — America or Australia — or perhaps blackest Africa — and freedom at last. Together always.

## FELIX TO CLAUDIA

After all we have gone through together, I really think that you might trust me, Claudia, and not believe all the gossip you hear.

How could I be the heartless hypocrite which you accuse me of being? What good would it do me to deceive you? You know, darling, that I live only in the thought of you and of our future life together. You really hurt my feelings when you seem to imply that there is anyone else but you. Darling, please believe that *you* only *exist* for me.

I did not want to tell you about it, but now

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that it's all over I think I will. Well, darling, not only do I owe you all the best moments of my life, but I owe you life itself. Last night a shell exploded right in our trench, burying us in loose earth and stones. When we recovered our senses and began taking stock of things again, I found that my tunic was torn to shreds and my large cigarette-case which you gave me dented in the middle; there is no doubt that what made that dent would have made a much deeper one in me! We are moving about constantly now, so there is no time to write more. I think of you always.

### CLAUDIA TO FELIX

The thought of what might have happened if that cigarette-case had not been in your breast-pocket makes me sick with dread. Yet I know you will live through all those horrors, and I know we must soon, very soon be happy again. But much, much happier than

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we ever were. Surely this terrible war will soon be over now; if America's help was longed for so intently, surely it must do *some* good. The winter evenings are a bit dreary, but I think of the future and all is well. Robert is getting on well. He moves his hand enough now to be able to turn the pages of a book, and he can use a spoon. I am glad to say that he has become devoted to that nice nurse, and is not as dependent upon me as he was. That will make things easier later on.

I think you are right about the East. We should begin by China and Japan. But I expect it will rather depend upon the season of the year. Darling, I adore writing about all this, but will it ever happen? Is such bliss really intended for us? Does it not seem like trampling over dead bodies? What a ghastly, morbid thought! No; our future, our glorious future, is all there, waiting for us to live it. I hope we shall begin soon.

So life went on and the dreary years passed slowly at Limon.

Dear Uncle Horatio came to stay. He was very delightful. He had two secretaries now. Miss Brown had a Miss O'Donnell to help her. They were getting on nicely with their work, and Uncle Horatio had had a wonderful piece of luck: some stocks he owned in South America, that had never seemed to be worth more than the paper they were printed on, had now gone up by leaps and bounds. He was a very much more wealthy man than before the war; he had been able to add almost a dozen second sons to the list as he had first conceived it. Robert now listened to all "his uncle's" stories with good-natured interest. It must not be understood that Sir Horatio could only speak about his hobby. He took a very intelligent interest in all the movements of his young friends, as well as in the politics of his country and France, in finance, in art, in

agriculture, and in the higher-class culinary establishments.

Uncle Horatio would have stayed longer, but he got some disquieting news from London and hastened back to consult the old Duke of Beaumont about some rumours he had heard concerning his second son.

I came to Limon as often as I could. Claudia and Robert were most touching together. Robert was completely dependent on his wife for all his comforts and all his amusements. But he also took a great interest in her appearance and her health. She practically never left him. He made very little progress towards recovery; he was still almost completely paralysed but for the use of his left hand; but he was so well cared for and so well guarded from any troubles that he had not had a second stroke of apoplexy.

Then came the news of the Armistice. Robert insisted upon being wheeled into the



largest ward of the hospital to tell the men himself in his thick semi-whisper the wonderful news. They cheered him again and again. With tears in his eyes he thanked them, then went back to order his best champagne to be served to them all that evening. He went to bed early, exhausted by his emotion.

Brownie told the Count next morning that Claudia had left in some haste for Paris, where she had been summoned by Molly.

Claudia started at dawn, in the car, leaving instructions for her things to come later. She went straight to the Palais Royal, let herself in with her latchkey and began putting the place in order. She asked the concierge to help. That worthy woman murmured something about the place not having been used *for a fortnight*, but Claudia did not hear this; she was humming a gay little tune as she shook a duster out of the window.

Felix arrived that evening. They were ecstatically happy. Claudia was radiant, Felix very sentimental and charming. They lived entirely at the flat. Claudia adored the proximity of her lover — the delightful Bohemian atmosphere — the meals she ordered by telephone — their clandestine outings to the theatre. It even amused her to go to her own house to get her correspondence, which she read on her way home in the taxi. Brownie hoped that she was having a good time, but said that Robert missed her very much indeed. Robert himself wrote a few words in his big, shaky handwriting, asking when she was coming back.

One morning when Felix was still asleep she made up her mind to make a clean breast of it all to Brownie. She could not go on any longer — the thing was impossible. She could not sacrifice all her life to this old man to whom she had already given so much. She

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had not really chosen him; it was unthinkable that she should be tied to him for the rest of her life.

She told Brownie all her reasons for going away with Felix. How suited they were to each other, how they had loved each other for seven years, etc. They would begin by going to America, where they would perhaps stay a long time. After some months she would write and give news. It was a plain, convincing letter, not a bit heroic or even very romantic, and poor Brownie, when she read it, was sorely tempted to think that Claudia was right. But what a blow that letter was to her! She got it one evening by the four-o'clock post, and read and re-read it. At one time she had almost expected this, but now she had thought that all danger was over. How would she tell Robert? Sooner or later he would get to know. Oh! it was cruel to him. Claudia couldn't have realised all it meant, her going

away. And the child — there was no mention of the child. Brownie had always had a sort of instinctive suspicion that Claudia did not like her child, but of course that was impossible — one always liked one's child. It was all terrible, and was going to be very difficult for her.

The next day she went to early Mass. She prayed till her poor knees were stiff and she grew so confused that she did not know what she was praying for. The day passed slowly; she half expected to hear from Claudia again — she made up her mind to go to Paris and look for her, if she heard nothing the next day.

That day Robert was very impatient and difficult. He refused to be pushed to the edge of the terrace; he would not let anyone prepare his grapes; he asked a hundred times when Claudia was returning. Brownie's heart sank. She would never, never be able to tell

him that Claudia was never coming back. She met the postman on the drawbridge when he came with the afternoon mail, but there was nothing from Claudia. All that evening she expected a telegram. Claudia *couldn't* have meant what she said. The letter was read again. It was a perfectly sensible letter — enthusiastic but not hysterical. Late that evening she rang her bell to ask if there had been any news of the Countess. There was none. Her little hold-all was all packed in her neat room, her travelling clothes laid out on her chair. Again she was praying on her knees by her bed. The door opened.

There stood Claudia — dramatically.

“Claudia, Claudia, my dear, dear — ”
Then, in sudden fear, “Is he here — Felix?
Where? ”

Claudia didn't say anything. She came into the room. “Why don't you have a fire?” she said. “It's cold.”

"Claudia! You're back for good!"

"Yes, I suppose I am," said Claudia. "For good!"

"My child, my child, you never meant to leave us!"

"Brownie, you're not to think that. I did mean to leave you, but apparently I was not wanted," and she crossed the room slowly, slowly, to the door, which she closed gently after her.

